

The Church and Government, Part 3 --- Romans 13:1-7

December 6, 2020

Preview

Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴for it is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. ⁵Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

Before we resume our study of Romans 13 and the relationship between the Church and government this morning (this being the first Sunday of December as we enter into the Christmas season), I am going to give you a brief preview—a trailer of sorts—of what we will study on Christmas Sunday.

I want to read a number of prophetic New Testament passages and I will tell you why I read these to you afterwards.

Matthew 24:3-8 And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” ⁴And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. ⁵For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will mislead many people. ⁶And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. ⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pains.”

Matthew 24:21-25 For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will again. ²²And if those days had not been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the

sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³Then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'He is over here,' do not believe him. ²⁴For false christs and false prophets will arise and will provide great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵Behold, I have told you in advance.

Matthew 24:29-33 *But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. ³¹And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET BLAST, and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. ³²Now learn the parable from the fig tree: as soon as its branch has become tender and sprouts its leaves, you know that summer is near; ³³so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.*

Matthew 24:37-39 *For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be.*

Matthew 24:42-46 *Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴For this reason you must be ready as well; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. ⁴⁵Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household slaves, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.*

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as indeed the rest of mankind do, who have no hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. ¹⁵For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught*

up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18Therefore, comfort one another with these words.

I could read you many more portions of Scripture concerning the Second Coming of Christ. You may be asking yourself, “John, if this is a preview of a Christmas sermon, why are you reading prophecy concerning His Second Coming?” Well, that is a good question. Here is the reason why: there were prophetic texts in the Old Testament concerning His First Coming that were as clear as these addressing His Second Coming. But no one, and I repeat, no one except for one group of people had any clue about what was going on that first Christmas day.

There was only one group of people who show up in the Gospels at the incarnation, God becoming man, the Christmas morning that we celebrate, who knew exactly what was happening. The Magi took God's prophetic word in the Old Testament seriously concerning the First Coming of Christ. They show up in the Christmas story and they know exactly what was going on. If you want to know the rest of the story, come two weeks from today and find out.

Introduction

Romans 13:1-7 Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4for it is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. 6For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7Pay to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

We have been studying the relationship between the Church and government over the last few weeks. One God-given function of government that you may have not considered is that government is to recognize those who do what is good and right in society. God's purpose for government is not just to punish crime, but also to reward good behavior.

1 Peter 2:13-14 *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.*

Romans 13:3 *For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same*

For example, this past week, President Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which is the nation's highest civilian honor, to former Notre Dame head coach Lou Holtz. Trump said this: "America recognizes Lou Holtz as one of the greatest football coaches of all time for his unmatched accomplishments on the gridiron, but he is also a philanthropist, author, and true American patriot." This award is granted to people who have made special contributions on behalf of the country.

Trump further said, "Most notably, Holtz earned an outstanding 100-30-2 record in 11 seasons at the University of Notre Dame. His 1988 team earned a perfect 12-0 record and were crowned national champions. Most importantly, he inspired generations of young athletes along the way. Since his retirement from coaching, Holtz has authored several books and continues to give back to his community through two of his own charities—the Holtz Charitable Foundation and the Holtz's Heroes Foundation."

About 28 years ago before becoming a pastor, I was at a conference where Holtz gave the key note address. He is a very engaging, motivational speaker who speaks clearly of the moral elements of his Catholic faith. Besides his helping people through sports, and charitable organizations, Holtz served for seven years as an officer in the U.S. Army Reserves.

Trump obviously was not recognizing Holtz's contributions to the kingdom of Christ. He recognized Holtz for his secular contributions to society, and this kind of acknowledgment by the government of high moral standards is a God-given task that government is to perform. I wonder if our government and the media spent more time recognizing those who do outstanding works for society rather than documentaries on well-known criminals and coverage of all the negative things in culture, if we might have a very different kind of America today.

As I said, we have been studying the relationship between the Church and government over the last couple of weeks. I have given you an overview of the subject concerning the Church's relationship to the government. Just by way of introduction this morning, I want to conclude our summary of what the Bible

teaches about government by giving you a cursory view of 1 Peter 2; so, turn to 1 Peter 2.

There are multiple passages in Scripture that direct believers to be subject to the government whatever form it may be. The Roman Empire was a society that was known for homosexuality, infanticide, abuse of women, immorality and violence. Although Peter and Paul both lived in this openly sinful, immoral and corrupt Roman Empire, they never condoned rebelling against civil authority.

We have seen that there are rare exceptions for civil disobedience in the Scripture. I have told you repeatedly the biblical command is simple: submit to civil authority regardless of its nature. Even unreasonable, evil, harsh rulers and oppressive systems are far better than anarchy. All forms of government, from dictatorships to democracies, are filled with evil because they are led by fallen sinners. But no matter what form of government, civil authority is from God, even though the individual rulers are godless.

I want to consider what Peter has to say about this subject of the Church's relationship to government. Just to give you some background of this letter, he focuses on the fact that Christians are aliens and strangers to this world. We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness, to which this world belongs, into God's Kingdom. Our citizenship and inheritance is in heaven. As a response, some believers may think they are exempt from submitting to worldly and godless governments.

In contrast to that, Peter taught that being in the Kingdom of Christ, instead of canceling the responsibility to government, actually strengthens the duty to submit to government. Christians should not bring dishonor to Jesus' name by disobedience and unruly conduct towards government.

We have considered that concerning obedience to government, Jesus explicitly taught the duty to *"render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."* The Jewish nation before, during and after the life of Christ, was known for rejecting Roman government. In fact, the nation's stubborn rebellion ultimately caused the destruction of their temple, their land, and the dispersion of their people by the Romans.

When Peter was writing this letter, there were already charges and suspicions against Christians. The Romans tended to view Christianity as simply a sect of Judaism, and so they viewed Christians with distrust. Therefore, it was imperative that the Church be careful in her obedience to government. This duty of submission is essential to Christian living in every time of history and in

every culture.

The Command of Submission to the State

*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution,
whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him
or the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right*

1 Peter 2:13-14

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution. Peter reiterates that it is God's will for the Church to submit to certain individuals because of their position of authority in government. Peter's expression "*every human institution*" is comprehensive and includes all the various human forms of authority in society. This reflects the wisdom of God in that this command applies no matter what type of government a believer may live under.

One commentator wrote, "Put into contemporary American terms, it means that Christians are to obey the law of the land, whether on a federal, state or local level. From the Supreme Court to the traffic court, from income tax to parking regulations, believers are to be subject to duly constituted authority."

Peter particularly mentions "*kings and governors*" because that is the form under which the Church lived during the writing of this letter. But "*every human institution*" covers all forms of human government even though the form in view is that of the Roman Empire. Peter certainly would have agreed with Paul's teaching in Romans 13 that all human government is from God. No matter what the precise form of civil government under which believers live, Peter's words demand obedience. The Scriptures provide clear directives for the Church under any and all forms of human government.

Peter would affirm that, for the Christian, the state is not the highest authority; and whenever a government demands something that conflicts with the clear teachings of Scripture, then Christians must obey the Word of God and suffer the results. We have seen in Acts 5 that Peter and John suffered a flogging for purposing to disobey the rulers of Israel. However, under ordinary circumstances, believers should actively uphold civil government in its support of law and order. Peter says here in verse 13, "*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution.*"

Peter states that the motivation for submitting to authority is to obey and honor the Lord. There is a distinct Christian motive for obedience. The human motive for obedience is to avoid punishment. Christian obedience is motivated by the glory of Jesus the Messiah.

Christ gave us the perfect example of submission to government. He denounced the sins of the Jewish leaders, but He never sought to overturn their authority. He never led demonstrations against Roman slavery and abuse of justice, or He also never engaged in any act of civil disobedience.

Instead of being preoccupied with political and social reform, Christ always focused on matters pertaining to the Kingdom of God. God is pleased when unsaved people associate Christians with integrity, righteousness, love, graciousness, humility and the Gospel of salvation; not protests against human institutions.

So we submit to government for the Lord's sake motivated by the glory of Christ. Peter further says, *“Submit . . . whether to a king as the one in authority or to governors as sent by him.”*

Again, *“kings and governors”* obviously refers to the governmental structure of the Roman Empire. However, there is a principle that applies to any graded or tiered power structure that normally characterizes human governments.

“King” points to the Roman emperor as supreme. The term *“king”* was not used by Romans, they referred to the *“emperor”*, but the Greek speaking provinces throughout the Roman Empire referred to him as *“king”*. When Peter was writing this letter, Nero was the emperor. I have mentioned before that Nero was a particularly evil and unworthy man to rule. Nero was known to be especially antagonistic towards Christians during the early Church. He had Christians expelled from Rome and blamed Christians for the fire that destroyed Rome.

So this command does not exclude those in authority who make bad or unjust decisions. Despite the evil that occurs, believers must understand and live in view that God is the sovereign and wise ruler over governments and nations. No matter how evil a leader may be, Christians still have the duty of submitting to government. Peter also mentions those who represent the king, in this case, governors. The purpose for the king in sending the governors reveals some specific functions that God intends for government.

Submit . . . to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers. To punish those who do wrong points to the restraint of evil as a major function of government. The noun translated *“to punish”* refers to the act of justice through fair and impartial punishment of those who commit evil acts and break the law.

Wayne Grudem conveys a helpful insight pertaining to this function of

government. He says, “Though some theories of criminal punishment maintain that reforming the criminal and protecting society from further crimes are the only legitimate purposes of punishment. But Peter here includes retribution, the inflicting of just deserts on the one who has harmed others, as a legitimate purpose.” Grudem is saying that the goal of government is not necessarily reforming a criminal but punishing an evil doer for his crime.

You can see this emphasis in the laws given by God in the Old Testament. The Old Testament concept of “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*” was not so much a standard by which a person could be vengeful against someone who did him wrong as much as making sure the punishment was equal to the crime. God directs there to be a punishment against the one who has broken the law and who inflicts harm on others.

Another function of government is: “*praise of those who do right*”. This function of human government is not as prominent as the punishment of evil. This refers to government commending good deeds that benefit the public. “*Praise*” is contrasted with “*punishment*” so Peter’s double statement indicates that civil government is responsible not only for the security of society, but also should promote moral well-being. Those who are examples of doing what is good and benefit society are to be recognized. Ancient historians record that government leaders in early history were much more proactive in praising good behavior than those in modern times.

The role of government is clear: to create fear that restrains evil, punish those who do wrong, and protect those who do right. Christians are to submit themselves to every human form of government.

Only when government commands an action that is against God’s commands can the Church engage in civil disobedience. When the Church does so, however, it is never commanded to take up arms; the Church must simply be willing to endure the consequence of her disobedience. So Peter gives the Command of Submission to the State. He also gives us the Purpose for Submission to the State.

The Purpose for Submission to the State

For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.
Romans 13:15

For such is the will of God... introduces the reason for the command for Christians to submit themselves to governmental authorities. It is God’s desire that by submitting to government, believers can effectively silence opposition.

The submissive attitude of believers towards government refutes the slanders and accusations made against Christians. Here Peter reiterates that doing right silences antagonism. Peter teaches that vicious verbal attacks are best answered, not by resentful or angry self-defense but, by openly living a righteous life.

He refers to *ignorant and foolish men* which describe not so much their lack of mental ability, but more a willful closing of the mind to God. It is a purposed ignorance. This was true in Peter's day and remains true to this day. Those who revile the Christian faith act without reason. There is an innate hostility towards those who live and speak for God. In other words, they are not interested in the truth.

In one important respect, today's culture is similar to that of Peter's time. Many unbelievers from all cross sections of culture constantly attack and criticize Christianity. In our day, opponents of the Gospel are usually vocal in their criticism and many are at the heads of political movements, educational institutions, and social and economic leaders.

There was a great defender of the faith at the end of WWII named Wilbur Smith who said that the world has opposed Christianity ever since Jesus' day, and believers should not expect things to be different today. He said this, "At first one would think that a religion which exalts and seeks to follow a Man who taught holiness and lived a righteous life; who never harmed anyone; who delivered people from demons, sickness, hunger and death; who died because He loved us and sought to bring men into right relationship with God and give them eternal life—one would think that such a character would have been welcomed with open arms the first moment He was announced. And the message of hope that He established would never know opposition or attack except from the demons of hell and Satan who is a liar and opposes the truth.

"But such has not been the history. In fact, the New Testament itself, from the records of the birth of our Lord in the Gospels down to the end of John's vision of the persecution to come, testify in the most startling way to the fact that Christ Himself was most viciously and constantly attacked, that His apostles suffered the same opposition, and that it was prophesied by these very apostles that Christianity would continue to suffer down to the end of this age."

So how do we respond to such purposed, willful rejection of the truth? How do we respond when ignorant and foolish men slander, criticize, and misrepresent the truth? We are to respond to purposeful rejection by doing right; and in so doing, you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

The reason Christians ought to submit to every authority is clear and basic. Right conduct stops the mouths of critics. Integrity, morality, and purity of life are all effective character tools to muzzle the enemies of Christianity.

Paul exhorts Titus in Titus 3:1-5, *“Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, 2to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. 3For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. 4But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”*

What I am getting ready to say is very important, so listen closely. Our culture and government are not the enemy. It is wrong to blame America’s disintegration on political parties, liberal conspiracies, or biased media. They are not the root problem. American's who think differently than us are our mission field; they are not the enemy.

The world is sinful. We should not be shocked or surprised that they are acting like sinners. How else can they act? They are blinded and have no spiritual discernment. That is why it is foolish to expect human government to produce the kind of righteousness and justice that only God can accomplish.

Government is not capable of enforcing our biblical standard for living. The greatest power we have to impact society is through proclaiming the Truth and having our walk be consistent with our talk. We must be careful not to treat unconverted mankind as our enemy, rather we are to look on them with compassion.

So Peter affirms the command for submission to the government and further gives the purpose for why we are to submit to government; we are to submit for the sake of Christ Jesus and His honor. By submitting, we silence the critics concerning who Jesus is. Peter obviously agrees with Paul in Romans 13.

That brings our overview to a conclusion of what Scripture teaches concerning the relationship between church and government. With all of that in mind, I want to turn back to Romans 13 and I want to simply introduce this section.

The Church and Government, Part 3

Romans 13:1,2 *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.*

We have seen that the starting point of Paul's argument is found in the reason he gives for his overarching, opening statement that "everyone", not only Christians, "must submit himself to the governing authorities." Why? The answer is not that you will get into trouble if you don't or that obedience is necessary for maintaining social order. These are good practical reasons that Paul understands and will bring into the discussion later. But they are not the reasons he gives at the beginning.

What he says in verse 1 is that we must obey the authorities because "there is no authority except that which God has established" and "the authorities that exist have been established by God." In other words, the starting point for Paul's argument is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God; and in this case in regard to human rulers, God is sovereign. Therefore, those who exercise authority do so because God has established them in their positions.

I have told you that Paul does not answer a lot of our questions. For example, when is a government a legitimate government, and when is it not? Or when is it right to rebel against an unjust or tyrannical government, or is it permitted at all?

Concerning this last question, I want to insert a footnote. We have considered that there are legitimate times to disobey government, namely when they demand by law something that goes against God's clear directives. But as I have said before, we are never told to take up arms against government.

I want to mention a couple of negative examples concerning taking up arms against government. The first is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and pastor during WWII. He took a stand against the evils of the Nazi state. He is to be commended for courageously returning to Germany from America where he was living at the time, to help the struggling church and give it leadership. However, Bonhoeffer joined a band of Germans who plotted to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was not executed for speaking out against Nazism. He was executed for being involved in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. We can

understand how he might have felt that killing Hitler was the only option left for him to stop the growing evil of the Nazis, but desperation does not make murder right. So at this point, Bonhoeffer clearly went beyond any possible biblical instruction.

Contrast Bonhoeffer's conduct with that of David in his struggle against King Saul. God had already removed his blessing from Saul, and Saul was seeking David's life. David did not have to wait in Jerusalem to be killed. He had every right to flee. But David did not cross over the line and try to kill Saul. On the contrary, he spared Saul's life on at least two occasions while he waited for God to remove him, which God did in the end.

Jesus told Peter, when Peter drew a sword and cut off a man's ear after a mob came to arrest Jesus, "All who draw the sword will die by the sword."

There is another example that was prevalent a number of years ago, namely some of the wrong attempts of Christians to stop the terrible killing of human life through abortions. I need to say that there are good works being done by people who effectively stop and help mothers who are going into abortion clinics. Many lives have been saved by such efforts. Nonetheless, the problem arises when people break the law in their attempts to prevent someone who is walking into an abortion clinic.

James Boice makes a clear statement about this kind of behavior, "When I am talking about the abortion problem, as I often do, I usually challenge the blockading of abortion clinics on the basis of the methodology being used. I say that we live in a video age and that video turns our tactics against us to the point of our losing the battle against this great evil. Those who are recording the events will never record a serious discussion about the true nature of abortion or the value of a life made in the image of God conducted between an anti-abortionist and a woman who is considering an abortion. That is not good entertainment.

"But as soon as a restraining order is issued and the police arrive to begin arresting the demonstrators and handcuffing them, then the cameras roll, because this supports their desire to discredit the pro-life movement. And we who oppose abortion appear as people who are violent and who want to take away other people's rights. That is a problem the pro-life people need to consider carefully."

Even more than that, it is not right to break into abortion clinics and destroy records and equipment, or do things that are even worse like blow up the

abortion clinic. There was one Florida case in which one demonstrator shot and killed a doctor who had been performing abortions. The act was not courageous or godly. It was murder. We can understand that many feel that they must do something to draw attention to the evil that exists rather than do nothing.

But as one Christian leader writes, “In our day, breaking laws to make a dramatic point is the ultimate logic of terrorism, not civil disobedience. Rightly practiced civil disobedience has its place. But we have to be very careful how we use it and what we may be unleashing if we do.”

Conclusion

The bottom line is we need to understand that left to ourselves we are like those described in the last verse of the Book of Judges when, “*Israel had no king; [and] everyone did as he saw fit in his own eyes.*” That is why Paul insists in verse 1 that we are to obey secular authorities—Government is God’s provision for avoiding anarchy.

So no matter what 2021 brings by way of political change we know the mind of God concerning our response to government.