

The Church and Government, Part 4 --- Romans 13:1-7

December 13, 2020

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.

Introduction

I told you a few weeks ago that I have encountered much fear in people over this last year because of COVID and the political/social unrest in our country. Particularly, the unknown direction of government has caused intense anxiety. There was a similar situation recorded in the Old Testament when the change of government caused anxiety for Isaiah. The circumstance involves the well known chapter that records Isaiah's vision of the Lord's sovereign, majesty as He sits on His throne in unimaginable glory.

Isaiah 6:1-4 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, (infinitely separate, transcendent) is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

We begin to get a sense of the fearfulness of this vision by considering Isaiah's response in the next verse: *"Behold, I am ruined."*

Isaiah saw a magnificent scene of the eternal God on His throne in His glory. He is undisturbed and exalted in praise. His glory fills the earth. It is helpful to

remember the context of this amazing vision. Verse 1 says that in the year that Uzziah died Isaiah saw this sight. Uzziah had been a good king over all. At his passing, Isaiah thought the government would disintegrate, and thus the nation would be ruined. So Isaiah went into the temple, which is a good place to go at a time like that, and he came into God's presence. There he saw the Lord sitting on His throne . . . high and lifted up. In other words, God was still firmly in control. King Uzziah was dead, the government was shaky, but God was not dead. God was still sovereignly directing all things on His throne.

We need to constantly remind ourselves of such truths—

- God's sovereignty, and His wisdom;
- His transcendence in all of who He is;
- His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts.

It is so encouraging to me to see and read of God's saints who are not anxious in very trying times. I think of George Mueller who took care of over 10,000 orphans over the course of his life in England in the 1800's. One evening all the food had run out and the children living with him at that time were at the table wondering what they would eat.

Mueller told the children to bow their heads so that he could thank the Lord for what they were getting ready to eat. I am sure that they thought he had lost his mind as they looked at the empty table. But after praying, there was a knock on the door. The local dairyman explained how his cart had broken a wheel right in front of the orphanage. He asked if the orphanage could use all the dairy products in his cart, cheese, milk and butter because it was all going to go bad. Those kind of things don't just happen. Mueller had a rare trust in God even when things looked bleak.

Our faith can be shallow at times, yet the Lord is always on His throne. He is never worried or concerned; therefore, we should not be anxious. He is working out His plan even through our American political process. We have no need to fear the future concerning our government or COVID or anything else.

It has been exciting for me to study Romans 13 concerning the relationship between church and state. It has caused me to consider the subject of government in a broader biblical context. For example, I have told you before that there are at least three main themes that form the backbone of Scripture. One of them has to do with the subject of government. The three themes are as follows: #1 Salvation is obviously one theme. You can go from Genesis to Revelation and track the theme of God reconciling man to Himself through the person of Jesus. Jesus is the climax of the theme of salvation.

A second major theme in Scripture involves the covenants (not to be confused with Covenant Theology). You can track the covenants found in Scripture and find the covenant theme from Genesis to Revelation. The Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant are all fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

The third and final theme is the Kingdom of God (the government of God). The Kingdom is an anchor in Scripture. God has always determined to govern the earth through a mediatorial or representative ruler. Adam and Eve were the first representatives, however they fell from their position when they rebelled against God. God chose Abram to make him a great nation and through that nation to rule. There was established for a time, early in Israel's history, a theocracy where God ruled over the Jewish nation. Nonetheless, the nation rejected God as King and demanded a human king. The first king being Saul and later David and others. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this kingdom theme as He is the perfect God/Man who will rule as the perfect Representative of God in the Millennium kingdom and throughout eternity.

These three themes: salvation, covenants, and kingdom weave together throughout the Bible and even history and all find their fulfillment in Christ. This last theme of the kingdom speaks to the subject of government. God is the eternal King over all. He has always ruled over the universe and always will. Jesus is the perfect King who will rule on this earth and whose government will have no end. The familiar passage in Isaiah is often quoted during this Christmas time of year.

Isaiah 9:6-7 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. 7There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

The exaltation of Christ has much to do with His eternal government established in perfect justice and righteousness. God created and ordained government. Jesus' reign will be the epitome of perfect government.

God has an overarching plan concerning government in the history of man. We could spend some time considering God's revelation of man's history given to Nebuchadnezzar in his vision of the statue recorded in the book of Daniel. Not only is it a chronological history, but also it is an overview of types of governments.

Babylon was ruled by an ultimate monarch, the highest form of government. Next, came Medo-Persia which had a king that shared power with a decentralized government structure. Then there was the Greeks who, at one time had a king but later evolved into a democracy. The Romans followed and were governed by the Roman Republic. This was a form of government that allowed for people to elect officials. It was a complex government with a constitution, detailed laws, and elected officials such as senators. At the end, Christ will come and put an end to all earthly governments. He will rule as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

One question that I had as I studied this past week was “When was the beginning of human government?” We find the answer in Scripture. Concerning the beginning of human government, we see the seeds of government being planted by God after the flood when He instructs Noah concerning capital punishment.

Genesis 9:6 states, *“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.”* No one has a right to take a human life. If you do, then you forfeit your own life. Protecting human life is a role of government. *“By man his blood shall be shed.”* Our contemporary American society feels differently about human life. We let murderers go free yet kill unborn babies. We live in a day when evil is called good, and good is called evil.

God has high regard for human life. Why? Because man is made in God's image. When one person kills another, he or she is striking a blow at God. God placed into all of humanity a conscience that, among other things, convicts man that murder is wrong. Murder has been wrong in every culture, in every time of history, and in every geological location. Why is that? Because God has hardwired that knowledge into man through his conscience. All of mankind at the end of the flood, a total of eight people, were directed how to punish murder, namely *“whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed.”* This was the seed of all government and one primary purpose of government.

One of the primary means God uses to restrain evil in the world is human government. Human laws and police forces and judicial systems and capital punishment provide powerful deterrents to evil actions. Government is necessary because much of the evil in this world is irrational and can only be restrained by force. We have had decades of history in America to show that education and reason do not reform or deter man's sin nature.

Sadly, even governments, because of man's fallen nature, can be used for evil

ends. However, that is not God's stated intent for government. God clearly declares that government is for the good of people and to restrain evil. Romans 13:4 teaches that government *"is a minister 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 minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil."*

So this morning, we continue our study of what these first seven verses of Romans 13 teach about the Church's relationship to human government.

Review

Last week we completed a summary of what the Bible teaches about government. We finished by considering what Peter taught about this subject in 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, 14or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right."*

We saw that 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.

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.

We saw that verse 14 says, *"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. We saw that the goal of government is not necessarily to reform a criminal, but to punish an evil doer for his crime.

We also considered verse 15, *"For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."* 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. Right conduct stops the mouths of critics. Integrity, morality and purity of life are all effective character tools to quiet the enemies of Christianity.

We considered Paul's exhortation to Titus in Titus 3:1-3, *“Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For 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.”*

The Bible teaches that Satan is the prince of the power of the air. As a result of Satan's efforts and mankind's sin nature, there are injustices and corruption in all governments. But we must keep in mind that God is sovereign over Satan. He is a created being. His end is coming soon and he knows it. We are never told to fear him. Therefore, we do not fear his efforts in government to oppose the Church. God is sovereign over everything that happens here.

History is the account of government after government flourishing for a time and then coming to ruin. Why? Because governments will ultimately be full of human corruption and lawlessness. But nonetheless, believers are to submit to government.

The Church and Government, Part 4

So we come to our text in earnest in Romans 13. We find that Paul provides five directives concerning the church's responsibility towards government in these seven verses. We obey government because: #1 Government is Ordained by God; #2 Government is the Servant of God; #3 Government is the Sword of God; #4 Because of Conscience; #5 Pay Taxes to Sustain Government.

Before we consider these Five Directives, I want to give you a footnote concerning believers' involvement in government and social reform. There is much discussion today about the Church's responsibility for social reform and, by implication, our involvement in government. The mission of the Church is not to change society, although change is often a beneficial by-product of the effective ministry of the Church. The primary purpose of the Church is not political but spiritual. The bottom line is that the best human government cannot achieve what only the Church can do; and the worst human government cannot stop the Church or hinder the power of the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

We can't protect or expand the cause of Christ by human political and social activism, no matter how great our efforts may be. We fight a spiritual battle against worldly and demonic doctrines that are set up against the truth of God. We win our warfare against them with the weapon of the Word of God.

The issue of involvement and social reform surrounds the matter of priority. We must keep in mind that even the greatest earthly good we may be able to accomplish in the temporal world is insignificant compared to what the Lord is able to accomplish through us in the spiritual work of His kingdom. Ancient Israel was called to be a holy nation to reveal the world to YHWH, to speak the truth of reconciliation to God. The Church is called to be a kingdom of priests, not a kingdom of social activists.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Consider for a moment the environment in which Jesus was born. He was born into a society where political corruption and authoritarian government were common. Unjust tyrants and murderous dictators were everywhere. During that time, taxes were outrageous. The government approved overcharging and extortion by tax collectors. This made the financial burden on the people overwhelming.

Human slavery was abundant. By some estimates, the Roman empire had three slaves for every one free person. All of this was the exact opposite of democracy. King Herod ruled the area with severe cruelty. You recall at Jesus' birth, when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi concerning the birth of Jesus, how the government responded? It says in Matthew 2:16 “ . . . *Herod became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the Magi.*”

Even in light of all this injustice, Jesus never called for political or social reform, even by peaceful means. He never attempted to capture the culture for biblical morality or to gain greater freedom. Instead he clearly stated, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.” Furthermore, in light of the corruption of the Jewish leaders, He told His disciples in Matthew 23:2-3, “*The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.*” The disciples were not to imitate the behavior of those wicked Jewish leaders, but they were to obey what they said.

Changing the form of the government or superficially moralizing it were not Jesus' goals. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. Jesus came to

meet the deepest need of mankind, a need that only He could satisfy. He addressed the heart and souls of men and women. Their political, social, economical, racial issues were not a primary concern. He taught the saving Gospel that had the power to make their souls right with His Father, to save them from hell, and give to them eternal life. At His first coming, Jesus did not come to establish a new social or moral order. He established His church and told them to go and make disciples.

No people group in the United States or in any other part of the western world has had their babies massacred while they slept. Many people on welfare today have material wealth, conveniences, opportunities and rights that even the wealthiest citizens of Jesus' day could not have imagined. But, neither the Lord nor His apostles give any justification for political revolt, rebellion, or taking up arms. There was no effort on His part to eliminate social or political injustice.

So we come to the first directive in our text. Government is to be obeyed because: Government is Ordained by God.

Government is Ordained by God

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.

*Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God;
and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.*

Romans 13:1,2

We have already touched on these verses before. This command for believers to be subject to government runs through the whole of the New Testament.

Titus 3:1-2 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.

1 Timothy 2:1-3 First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior”

1 Peter 2:13-15 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, 14or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. 15For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

Persecution of believers progressively increased during the first few centuries of the early Church. Nonetheless, it was amazing to me this past week to read that the early Church fathers continued to stress the need of the Church to follow the directives in these verses.

For example, Justin Martyr in his Apology writes, “Everywhere, we, more readily than all men, endeavor to pay to those appointed by you the taxes, both ordinary and extraordinary, as we have been taught by Jesus. We worship only God, but in other things we will gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that, with your kingly power, you may be found to possess sound judgment.”

Tertullian adds, “We offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God Without ceasing for all our emperors we offer prayer, for security to the empire . . . for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest.” He goes on to say that the Christian cannot but look up to the emperor because he “is called by our Lord to his office Caesar is more ours than yours because our God appointed him.”

We have seen that the first reason to obey government is because God is sovereign and has sovereignly established all governments, even governments that persecute Christians. Concerning persecution by government, recall that John the Baptist was beheaded by King Herod; Jesus was crucified under Pilate; James the brother of John was executed by the king; Paul was put to death by Nero. Yet, Paul writes in Romans 13:2, *“Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.”*

So obviously, Christianity was not intended to be a movement to counter government or clean up society. As we saw at the beginning of our study of Romans, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for the individual. The churches main and highest priority is the salvation of souls.

No doubt it is difficult to say that we are to obey a corrupt government or a government that persecutes believers. Even in our American government, there is corruption from the top down and it is not confined to one party. Nonetheless, we comply to government.

We have considered this first point rather extensively that we are to obey government because God has sovereignly ordained it for the good of mankind. John MacArthur writes this concerning these first two verses, “No matter what form it takes, no human government at any time in history, at any place on

earth, among any people on earth, at any level of society, has ever existed or will ever exist apart from the sovereign authority of God. The entire world, everything in heaven and earth, including Satan and his hosts are subject to their Creator. Also, without exception, the power that any person, group, or society may possess is divinely delegated and confined.”

Next, we are to obey government because Government is the Servant of God.

Government is the Servant of God

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 it is a minister of God to you for good

Romans 13:3,4a

Minister (διάκονος) we get our word “deacon” from this word. It refers to any kind of broad service that supplies the need of another person. Paul is saying that government is from God for the purpose of serving mankind. The fact that government is ordained by God and is a servant of God should create within us a respect and wholesome attitude towards government and those in places of position.

I am the first to complain about the lifestyles and decisions of those in government positions. However, in studying these verses, I am convicted of how I talk about politicians. I have my favorite jokes about those in authority, however, I need to stop and evaluate God's view of these people. It is helpful for me to keep in mind these verses from Titus and Timothy—

Titus 3:3 *For 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.*

1 Timothy 2:1-4 *First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

So we are to remember that we are no better than the worst politician. We are who we are by the grace of God. We pray for those in government, especially for their salvation.

We obey government because it is ordained by God; we obey government

because it is the servant of God. Third, and I will just introduce this point, we obey government because Government is the Sword of God.

Government is the Sword of God

But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Romans 13:4b

The key words in the verse concerning the consequences of evil are “*afraid*,” “*sword*,” “*avenger who brings wrath*.” All of these speak of the consequences of breaking the laws of government.

I read this past week that the incoming administration would like to abolish capital punishment. Conversely, I further read that the outgoing president is pushing through the execution of many on death row. The bottom line is that, as servants of God and ordained by God, government is to carry out the standards of God. Government is an “*avenger who brings wrath*.”

One woman who is to be executed was convicted for killing a pregnant woman and her child. I do not mean to be gruesome, but she cut the child out of the woman's womb and killed the unborn child. God is not concerned about an attempt to reform this woman. He demands that she be brought to justice as we saw in the seeds of government in Genesis 9:6, “*Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.*”

We do not have to be fuzzy concerning the spirit of what God expects of government as the Sword of God. There are plenty of precedents laid down in Scripture. The perfect criteria for penalties and consequences that are to be practiced by government are found in God's perfect law in the Mosaic Law. While we are not under the Mosaic Law, we can know the principles that God has revealed. We know God's mind as we consider what He said was an appropriate penalty for an offense committed.

For example, for theft, the punishment included restitution, returning that which was stolen or payment of equal value. If the thief had no money or property with which to repay, he was required to work off his debt.

Under the Law, punishment was always public. The offender was shamed before his family, friends, and society as means of deterrence. But once the penalty was enacted, the criminal was to be accepted back into society.

Furthermore, punishment was generally corporal. The lashes of the whip for

certain offenses brought immediate physical and bodily pain. In that way, punishment was short-term. As I said, once the penalty was paid, the offender was free to pursue his life again.

Under Old Testament law, punishment was to be without pity for the offender. Deuteronomy 19:13 says, *“You shall not pity a murderer, but you shall purge the blood of the innocent from Israel, that it may go well with you.”* This policy is in stark contrast to what is found in many societies today, where often more pity is expressed for criminals than for their victims.

God's principles in the Mosaic Law had several objectives. For example, the principle of *“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”* was not a vengeful practice but was given to make sure the penalty was equal to the crime. God's design was to prevent over-punishment and under-punishment.

On top of that, punishment was a deterrent to crime, to discourage the guilty person from committing further crime, and to discourage others from following his unlawful example. I will have more to say about government being the Sword of God in our next study.

For now we see that the third reason for the Church to submit to government is the power of the sword. Power of the sword means force. This is what the state has been given by God, and it is the basis for how the state conducts its affairs. We do not like to think about this very much, because forcing someone to do something is not supposed to be good in our “free” society.

We do not like to think of our government operating by force like dictatorships do or like Communist countries have done, but nonetheless, our good old USA does ultimately operate by the power of the sword. We can see that in many areas like police forces in every city and town, the military, the enforcement of taxation, and other things.

Conclusion

Thankfully the Lord has made clear what He expects from His church. As we see greater challenges on the horizon for the church, we need to determine before hand that we will obey the Lord and let Him deal with outcome.