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Romans

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:21

Paul finishes chapter 12 of Romans with this verse. When we allow ourselves to be overcome by evil, we are the ones who lose the battle. This is perfectly obvious when observing the actions of an instigator. As he needles and pushes he will delight in his perverse exploits. As one falls prey to him, the smug satisfaction of victory can be evidenced on his face; he has overcome and feels vindicated by the reduction of you, his foe, to his own depraved level.

However, if you stand against him and continue to put forth blessings and goodness, there will eventually be a vindication of your approach in one of a couple ways. One is that the instigator will simply release a stream of anger and profanity and depart, or he may concede that you have been right in your actions. Either way, good has overcome the evil.

An excellent place to see this in action is on a news talk show where a political issue is debated. Or, listening to various talk-radio hosts will allow the same opportunity. Those hosts who continuously put forth a stream of positive thoughts and encouragements will inevitably win their debate. Eventually, opponents don't even bother entering the dialogue because they see that the host won't be shaken.

However, for those hosts who allow themselves to get rattled, those who engage them will continue to needle them until that comes about. In these cases, even if the stronger or morally right argument is held by the host, the debate is still lost.

This is what Paul is speaking of in any life situation. When we allow evil to overcome, then only evil has come. But when we overcome evil with good, then good has prevailed and the enemy is silenced.

Life application: One of the most difficult tasks of all is to know when to throw out a blessing in order to fend off an attack. As a stable and reasonable thinker you will always win the argument if you keep your emotions in check and allow grace, not angry emotion, to rule the situation. Learn this thought from Paul and remember it when you face such pressure - "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." Colossians 4:6

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Romans 13:1

Paul now begins a new chapter and a new direction of thought. His statement in verse 1 is clear and concise. It is prescriptive in nature, meaning it is a prescribed directive; not a "wish" but a command. The second half of the verse will explain the first half. Afterwards, he will give obvious conclusions based on his comment here. Verse 1 begins with, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities."

God's people are in this world, here and now. Though we belong to a higher rule and authority which exists, it is a spiritual kingdom at this point. Until Christ returns and sets up His kingdom here on earth, He has appointed us to live within His spiritual kingdom while at the same time living under human authorities.

Because of this, we are directed to "be subject to the governing authorities." This means that we are to be obedient to the laws of the land, whatever they may be. But there is an obvious conclusion that we can make. If we are under the rule of Christ, the highest authority that exists, and a governing authority under which we live issues a rule which is contrary to the precepts of the Bible, then we must disobey that rule of the lower government.

This is no different than how individual states are set up under the overarching federal rule. If America, for example, has a set law, and a state issues an order which violates the federal law, then we must obey the federal law over the state law. The same is true with our obligation to God. This precept is seen explicitly exercised by the apostles who faced the high priest and council in Jerusalem. When they were given a directive contrary to what God would have them do, their answer was that, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Acts 5:29.

However, supposing that the government under which we live has issued nothing contrary to our duties to God, we are expected to be in submission to them. And the reason is given, "For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." Time and again, the Bible notes that it is God who sets up kingdoms and brings them low. He directs the course of nations according to an infinitely wise plan. He also directs where we will be born and live out our years (Acts 17:26-28). Therefore, because He has established these things, we are bound under them and are expected to be in adherence to what He has ordained.

Life application: Regardless of where you live and whether you agree with the policies of your governing authorities or not, you are expected to be obedient to them. The exception is that you are never to violate your obligations to God in order to adhere to what a human government has ordained. And how can you know when such a violation of God's rule is directed? By knowing your Bible. Read your Bible.

Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. Romans 13:2

This verse begins with "therefore" as an introduction to the consequences of disobeying the prescription of the previous verse where all people are to "be subject to the governing authorities." When we fail in this regard, we can only expect the governing authorities to respond with the force they bear against malefactors.

"Whoever" is given as an all-encompassing round up of those who would subvert the duly established authority which was appointed by God. By stating "whoever" Paul is ensuring that we note that believers are not exempt from the statement. If we think that because we are a part of Christ's kingdom that we are not subject to earthly rule and authority, we are only deluding ourselves. And so, "whoever (including believers) resists the authority resists the ordinance of God." Why? Because verse 1 told us so. The "authorities that exist are appointed by God."

If we fight against our God-appointed rulers, we are fighting against what God has ordained. It couldn't be laid out any more clearly. And such resistance "will bring judgment on themselves." The word for "judgment" is krima, a word that is at times used for "condemnation." However, it should be noted that civil disobedience by a believer doesn't mean they will lose their salvation. This isn't the type of condemnation spoken of. A sealed believer is saved, despite such wrongdoing. It is rather speaking of condemnation within the framework of the society, up to and maybe including a sentence of death.

When we do wrong, we can only expect whatever punishment is handed out for wrongdoing. And even when we don't do wrong, if the society sees our actions as wrong, judgment may still come. The apostles found this out. Most of them were beaten, tortured, and executed for their faith. The same is true with countless millions since their time. But Peter (who was martyred for his faith) says this concerning such suffering -

"For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully." 2 Peter 1:19

Life application: At times, the values of our leaders are much different than those that we as Christians hold to. However, if their decisions don't force us to act in a manner contrary to our faith, we must be obedient to their rules. This is right and pleasing in the sight of God who ordained those leaders to be over us.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

Romans 13:3

Paul's explanation of verse 1 continues here in verse 3. He makes a general proclamation concerning the state of rulers. This isn't intended as a complete evaluation of all rulers, some of which are truly crummy, wicked, and bent on evil. Rather, the general state of rule is one intended for the good of society and rulers generally work for what they believe is that good, even if it is skewed or perverse. What is universally true though is that God has ordained these rulers to be rulers and therefore His good end is being worked out through them.

The thought that such rulers "are not a terror to good works, but to evil" means that if the laws they lay out are obeyed, then one can expect peace from them. Saddam Hussein was a ruler who was generally considered corrupt, evil, and immensely brutal, but for those who were obedient, their lives were not usually ones of terror. However, if someone bucked the system and the rules he had in place, they were certainly expecting harsh judgment when brought to trial. "Terror" is a good word to describe their state.

And so, although to be generally applied, Paul asks a question which should generally be considered, "Do you want to be unafraid of the authority?" This is to be taken as a rhetorical question with an obvious answer of "Yes." Only a perverse person would want to be on the outside of the law. And though it is quite common, it is still the exception rather than the rule. Most people want to live

peaceably. And so in response to this, he gives the correct attitude to bear, "Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same."

Laws are in place for the proper working of society. Police are in place for proper adherence to the law or to arrest law breakers. Courts are in place to try law breakers. And sentences are given under the law for the punishment of crimes and even the execution of criminals. By doing what is good, instead of arrest, trial, and punishment, one can expect praise, not condemnation.

Life application: Paul's words so far in Romans 13 are given for peaceable living. He wrote this epistle under a most corrupt and wicked leader and yet they were applicable as general statements of living in any society, even one such as that of a bad Roman emperor. And the same is true today. Whether we have a good leader or a bad one, we should endeavor to do what is good under their rule.

For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Romans 13:4

Verse 4 starts with "for" to show the continued explanation of the previous verses. "He" is speaking of the "governing authorities" of verse 1 and the "rulers" of verse 3. Whoever our leader is, in whatever land and whatever time in history, this is the individual Paul now speaks of for us. This individual has been appointed by God to "minister to you for good." He is the protector of the land, the defender of the judicial system, the one responsible for the infrastructure, etc. Without leaders, society breaks down into anarchy.

Continuing, Paul notes next that based on the leader's position for us in doing good, "if you do evil, be afraid." That follows logically. A leader is appointed for the good of the society and when someone is hindering that good end, he has every reason to be afraid of the leader's wrath. He is the bearer of the sword (symbolizing the one who wields the policing and military powers) and "he does not bear the sword in vain." The sword is an emblem of death power and death. It

isn't a tool used for chopping wood, instead it is an implement used for taking life. The power and authority the ruler has been entrusted with will be used to ensure the continued, uninterrupted furtherance of society, or he will use the sword for corrective measure.

As noted in verse 1 though, there is a point where facing the sword is expected. That is when our allegiance to God is usurped by a human ruler. The exiles from Babylon were faced with such a dilemma in Daniel chapter 3 and they stood on the side of the Lord, even in the face of death. However, this is the exception, not the rule. Apart from our allegiance to God, we are instructed to live and work within the confines of the rule under which we reside (see Jeremiah 29:7). And the reason is restated for us to understand clearly, "For he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."

God is the one who establishes, builds up, and tears down societies. And He is the one who places every person in exactly the position that He determined (Acts 17:26-28) for His purposes. Because these are biblical truths, we only strive against what He has ordained when we strive against the life and position in which we have been placed. In the end, by subverting proper rule and authority, we can expect our leaders to execute wrath on us if we practice such evil.

Life application: If you are unhappy with your leaders, then work within the legal framework of your society to get them out of their leadership position. If you work in an illegal or subversive manner to oust them, then you are opening yourself up to whatever wrath is determined upon you.

Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. Romans 13:5

"Therefore" is given to sum up the what has been stated in verses 1-4. It should be noted that the term "God" is used six times in chapter 13 and all six are in connection with the concept of the rule of human government. This rule was established after the Flood of Noah in Genesis 9 and it has continued since that

time. The covenant has never been revoked and so in addition to our duties to God, we have the added responsibility to human governments appointed over us.

Because of this, "you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake." Paul has just told us that the appointed ruler "does not bear the sword in vain" and so we should be responsible citizens in order to avoid his wrath. But even more, because he is God's appointed minister, we have the added reason of being subject which is "for conscience' sake."

In other words, if we rebel against the duly established government, then we rebel against what God has ordained. We, in essence, work against what our conscience should be subject to. An interesting thought then arises. If we are to be subject to our rulers, then how can we expect governments to change, because they in fact do change. A prime example would be the American Revolution. If the colonists were to be subject to their government, were they then in violation of what God ordained when they revolted against the king?

The answer is "no" because the leaders of the colonies signed their names on the Declaration of Independence. By signing their names, they established a new government with the intent of separating from the old. Those who vowed allegiance to the new government, after the signing of the declaration, were now subject to that new government. However, it should be noted that if their cause failed, those who severed the ties of the old government would have been punished for their actions. Such wasn't the case and so those who are citizens of America today cannot be held to the governing rule of England.

Life application: One must consider carefully what they believe is a just cause for severing the ties they have with the government under which they live. It isn't always easy to determine, but until such action is taken, one is expected to be subject to their governing authorities.

For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Romans 13:6

In the previous verse, one avenue concerning the change of governments was looked at. There are many ways in which governments change - coup d'etat, elections, overthrow by attacking enemies, etc. are common ways that changes in political landscapes may occur. Another one is implosion through over-taxing of the people and abuse of the taxes which were levied on them.

This is where the United States is today. Although the implosion hasn't happened yet, the meal is already over, the cake has been served, and her fall is inevitable unless drastic measures are taken; a self-inflicted wound due to greed for power and control. And it has come about in no small part through the taxing system which is in place.

Having said that, and despite that fact, Paul instructs us that it is our obligation to pay taxes. "For" explains the previous thought which is that we are to be subject to the ruling authorities. Because we are, and because they are the ones who levy taxes, we are to pay what they levy. And Paul gives the reason. "For they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing." Their job, even if it means financially ruining the lives of the citizens under them, is ultimately to meet God's purposes.

It is God who sets up nations and it is He who gives them either good leaders or crummy leaders. This is seen again and again in Scripture as Israel and her surrounding neighbors are highlighted. When a nation is obedient to God, He gives them good leaders who properly shepherd the people. When they turn from him and mock Him and His word, He gives them crummy leaders. In a constitutional republic like the United States, this means that the wound truly is self-inflicted, and yet God knew before the choice was made what it would be.

In a nation such as the US, having an ungodly leader means that a vast portion of the electorate chose that ungodly person. God's foreknowledge of this is used in the overall plan of nations as He has ordained. Therefore, when a political party comes into power which ignores the constitution, redistributes the earnings of those who work to those who are indolent, shuns God, and promotes perversion, there is still no excuse to not pay the taxes which have been levied - no matter

how exorbitant. God's plans are being worked out, even through such wicked people.

One important lesson of the Bible is that even though God doesn't author evil, He can work with the evil we perpetrate to meet His good end. So when you get your tax bill and see that it is unfair from your perspective, pay it as you should. You are a citizen of the nation you belong to and the money, though seemingly wasted, is having its intended effect.

Life application: Pay your taxes.