

The Christian and Governmentⁱ

Romans 13:1-7

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As Christians, how do we honor God?

One of the ways we do it is by studying the Bible so that we may come to know him. We honor him by thanking him for all he has given and by praising him for all he is, in and of himself. We honor God by trusting him through the many trials and disappointments of life. We honor him by praising him as the source of whatever good may be found in us whatever good we may do in this life.¹

Another way we honor God is in our approach to his Word. When we discover something in his Word that he requires of us, we honor him by doing what he has commanded. We do not approach the Bible as a set of suggestions or to defend it (apologetically), but we approach the Bible with an attitude of submission. We who believe, believe in an obeying way, whether we like what God commands or not. The Bible is the authority, not my opinions, feelings or desires. While not always true, when we respond to biblical truth with, “But what if...” we are often saying we know better than God.

Why would I begin a sermon about Christian’s and the government with a focus on honoring God?

Simply because every response, thought, and behavior, that a Christian exhibits is all to be done to the honor, glory, and pleasure of God. That is the foundation of our lives. That is the umbrella under which we stand poised for daily holiness.

And what we have heard and read from many of our brothers and sisters in Christ over these past three months has sometimes seemed completely antithetical to this idea.

And so as we come back together as God’s people, we must do it with a spirit of humility, patience, and self-sacrifice – knowing that we do not all agree on many issues, but with the goal of Ephesians 4, “I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The issue of the Christian's relationship to government has been vitally important throughout the history of the church. Christians always have been faced with a struggle in this matter because the church has found itself under all kinds of governments and rulers with different perspectives of leadership.

In our struggle to answer the question of our relationship to government, we, as Christians, have not always answered correctly. There have been times in the history of the church where believers have decided that the right thing to do was to revolt against the government in power, demanding their rights, all in the name of Jesus. Wars were even begun for this same reason. Sometimes Christians have understood what their role was. But sometimes they have not understood their God-given role and revolted instead of submitting. Laws have been violated in the name of Christianity. Some Christians have decided that since they received poor treatment from certain governments, they were justified in their war against those governments. I know Christians who refuse to pay their taxes because they believe that their freedoms have been violated.

Some are calling for protest and moderate revolution against our government. They say the government is taking freedom away from the church and encroaching on religion.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, “To the Glory of God”, page 155.

But what does the Bible say? Turn to Romans 13:1-7.

The basic command is simple and succinct: **Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities.** In the broadest sense, **every person** applies to every human being, because the principle stated here reflects God's universal plan for mankind. Here, however, Paul is speaking specifically to Christians; Christianity and good citizenship should go together. And **subjection to the governing authorities** includes much more than simply obeying civil laws. It also includes genuine honor and respect for government officials as God's agents for maintaining order and justice in human society. I'll give you a minute to catch your breath because some of you are choking on this last statement.

This isn't just Paul's opinion. Teachings elsewhere in the New Testament, make clear that the principle of subjection to human authority applies to every believer, in whatever part of the world and under whatever form of government. Writing to believers who were "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia", Peter writes in 1 Peter, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Georgi Vins was a Russian pastor who, for many years before the fall of Soviet communism, suffered, along with many others, great persecution for his faith. Yet he was always very clear that, however severe their oppression and mistreatment became, he was determined to obey every law, just or unjust, with the exception of laws that would force them to cease worship or to disobey God's Word. Georgi willingly suffered "for doing what is right," but not "for doing what is wrong" (1 Peter 3:17). Georgi would not "suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler," but would gladly suffer "as a Christian" (1 Peter 4:15-16).

Fellow brothers and sisters, we are to be model citizens, obedient rather than rebellious, respectful of government rather than demeaning of it. We must speak against sin, against injustice, against immorality and ungodliness with fearless dedication, but we must do it within the framework of civil law and with respect for civil authorities. We are to be a godly society, doing good and living peaceably within an ungodly society, manifesting our transformed lives so that the saving power of God is seen clearly.

Speaking of this text in Romans, Robert D. Culver writes, "Churchmen whose Christian activism has taken mainly to placarding, marching, protesting, and shouting might well observe the author of these verses and then they might observe him first at prayer, then in counsel with his friends, and, *after that*, preaching in the homes and marketplaces. When Paul came to be heard by the mighty, it was to defend his action as a preacher."²

Speaking on this subject, John MacArthur states, "Be in subjection to" translates *hupotasso*, which was often used as a military term referring to soldiers who were ranked under and subject to the absolute authority of a superior officer. The verb here is a passive imperative, meaning first of all that the principle is a command, not an option, and second that the Christian is to willingly place himself under all governing authorities, whoever they may be.

Paul gives no qualification or condition. Every civil authority is to be submitted to willingly. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul teaches "that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on

² Robert D. Culver, "Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government", page 262.

behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Timothy 2:1–2), again with no exception related to the rulers’ competence or incompetence, morality or immorality, cruelty or kindness, or even godliness or ungodliness. He gives the same instruction in his letter to Titus, to whom he wrote, “Remind them [believers under his care] to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men” (Titus 3:1–2). He admonished the Thessalonian Christians “to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need” (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12).³

As always, Paul followed his own instruction. After being falsely accused of breaking Roman law, he and Silas were brutally beaten, thrown in prison, and placed in stocks in Philippi. But instead of railing out against the ones who had mistreated them and demanding their rights from the authorities, they spent the first night in jail (until the Lord miraculously delivered them) “praying and singing hymns of praise to God” (Acts 16:25). **Although, as we will see, there is an exception.**

The principle of civil obedience applied in the Old Testament as well. Even while His people were captive in the distant, pagan land of Babylon, the Lord commanded them, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

The Exception

But what about... There is one exception to the believer’s obligation under the Lord to willing and complete submission to civil authority: namely, any law or command that would require disobedience to God’s Word.

In Exodus chapter 1, when Pharaoh ordered the Jewish midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill all male babies when they were born, they feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. Because those women refused to disobey God by committing murder, God honored that civil disobedience and “was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty” (v. 20). It doesn’t always happen this way. When you disobey the government, you are accepting the consequences of that disobedience.

When Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were commanded to eat certain foods, they respectfully refused, because it would have meant defiling themselves by breaking of the Mosaic dietary laws. “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.” So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food. (Daniel 1:12-15)

It is important to note that, even while refusing to do what God had forbidden, those four faithful men of God showed respect for the human authority they had to disobey. Speaking for the other three as well as for himself, Daniel did not demand deference to their beliefs but respectfully “*sought permission* from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself” (v. 8, emphasis added), and he referred to themselves as the commander’s “servants” (vv. 12–13). In obeying God, they did not self-righteously or disrespectfully malign, contend with, or condemn civil authority.⁴

³ John MacArthur, “The Christian’s Responsibility to Government”, January 1985.

⁴ John MacArthur, “The Christian’s Responsibility to Government”, January 1985.

Two other familiar accounts of justifiable civil disobedience are also recorded in that book. When King Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to worship his gods and the golden image he had erected, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18)
Again, God blessed their faithfulness.

At the prompting of his government officials who were jealous of Daniel’s royal favor, Darius, issued a decree “that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lions’ den” (Dan. 6:7). Daniel respectfully but firmly refused to obey the decree, and the king reluctantly had him thrown into the lions’ den. Once again, God honored his servant’s faithfulness.

The Jewish leaders of Jerusalem warned Peter and John not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus , “But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19–20). The Lord had commanded them to go into all the world and preach the gospel, and so to obey the human rulers would mean to disobey Jesus their true king, which they would not do. Instead, Peter and the apostles answered and said, ‘We must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29).

But what about the church?

Like individual believers, a local church is obligated to observe civil laws such as zoning, building codes, fire safety regulations, and every other law and regulation that would not cause them to disobey God’s Word. A church is only justified in disobeying an ordinance that, for example, would require acceptance of homosexuals into church membership or of hiring them to work on staff. Or an order that would prohibit our meeting together.

In our case, during this pandemic, we did not close our services in submission to the government. Had the government demanded that we close our doors, we most probably would have not complied with that order. In our case we were following, what we believed at the time, was the soundest advice, from both the government and the medical community. And as that advice changed, and the facts became clear, we made changes to our decision as well.

In most of the world today, even including many former communist lands, Christians seldom face the need to obey God rather than men. By far our most common obligation, therefore, is to obey both God and men.

In most matters we are to respect and obey civil laws and ordinances, and we are to do it without reluctance. **Even when conscience leaves us no alternative but to disobey human authority, we do so with respect and with willingness to suffer whatever penalties or consequences may result.**

Although God may send his own people “out as sheep in the midst of wolves,” our Lord commands us to “be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). We are to be alert, cautious, and concerned about what is going on around us and in the world. But that must not be the focus of our attention, and our living in the midst of it must be innocent—free of anxiety, ill will, rancor, and self-righteousness. Men “will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues,” Jesus continued to warn; “and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it

shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt. 10:18–20). Furthermore, “brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved” (vv. 21–22).⁵

What about when a government is corrupt and trying to take away our rights?

Again, we look to Scripture. What was the world like in Jesus’ day? What was the world like when Paul and Peter wrote to the churches?

- Slavery was a way of life. In the Roman world, there were approximately three slaves to every free man.
- There was no republic or democracy. These people were ruled absolutely with no voice. Jesus came into a world dominated by slavery and this on-man-rule was the absolute antithesis of democracy that we hold so dear.
- There were extremely high taxes. Those who worked as tax collectors had sold themselves to Rome and then overcharged the people. That was typical of the extortion that existed. So, the taxes were unjust.
- They lived in a world of persecution. When Jesus came into the world, the Jews had become the extreme underclass for the Romans. They were an underprivileged and oppressed minority. They had no voice in Roman government and had to pay heavy taxes to their Roman task masters.

What was Jesus’ solution?

The people didn't have democracy or our republic, the opportunity to vote, and many of the freedoms we enjoy. But what did Jesus say? He said, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:21).

One commentator wrote, “He did not come with power and force to overthrow Roman dictatorship. He did not seek social change. He did not attempt to eliminate slavery. He did not come with political or economic issues at stake. He did not come to bring a new government or to wave the flag of Judaism. Those things were not the concern of His life and ministry. His appeal was ever and always to the hearts of individual men and women, not to their political freedom and rights under government. Jesus did not participate in civil rights or crusade to abolish injustice; He preached the gospel of salvation. Once a man's or woman's soul is right with God, it matters very little what the externals are. Jesus was not interested in a new social order, but in a new spiritual order--the church. And He mandated the church to carry on the same kind of ministry.”⁶

Reflect and Respond

The problems in Jesus' day were far more severe than ours. We must look at the issue differently to determine how a Christian should respond to his government. Throughout all the generations of the church, Christians have had to struggle with this issue. But we must come to some conclusion about what we are called to do and be in this society. What is our priority? What right does the government have over us? What is our proper response to that right? Admittedly we live in a tension.

⁵ John MacArthur, “The Christian’s Responsibility to Government”, January 1985

⁶ John MacArthur, “The Christians Responsibility to Government – Part 1”, June 2020

Regardless of the failures of government—many of them immoral, unjust, and ungodly—Christians are to pray and live peaceful lives that influence the world by godly, selfless living, not by protests, sit-ins, and marches, much less by rebellion.

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, we have both the right and the obligation to confront and oppose the sins and evils of our society, but only in the Lord's way and power, not the world's. In this way, says Paul, our living is "good and profitable for men" (Titus 3:8), because it shows them the power of God in salvation. They see what a person saved from sin is like.

So, what does it look like for us to respond biblically? We will look at that next Sunday evening.

¹ I am extremely grateful for the excellent work on this topic by Dr. John MacArthur in his series "The Christian's Responsibility to Government." Much of this sermon has been based on Dr. MacArthur's outline.