

Sermons through

Romans

God's Ministers

Romans 13:1-7

Part Four

The Sword

With Study Questions

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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. ²Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³For 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-7).

Review

We've discussed how we approach political tranquility (any true contentment) when we begin to grasp the sovereignty of God. The statement "**there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God**" (Romans 13:1) may extract a collective "What is God thinking?" when we consider that the vast majority of authority figures (especially in the political arena) throughout history range from ungodly to monstrous.

We may be tempted to think God has untethered the boat of governmental leadership and set us all adrift in a raging river of self-destruction. But the Christian finds respite for his/her soul in the knowledge that...

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, Like the rivers of

water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

We are called, in light of this, to have a proper, submissive and respectful disposition toward those in leadership, lest we find ourselves resisting **“the authority”** and **“ordinance of God” (Romans 13:2)**. They may not acknowledge that they are God’s servants/ministers, but we should nonetheless. A lack of submission may result in our bringing **“judgment”** on ourselves. This is not God’s final judgment but judgment within the realm of civil justice.

It does not follow from this, that these authorities are ultimate. We must always be willing to defer to the higher authority, which is God speaking through the Scriptures. Even though **“rulers”** in a general sense are used by God as a **“terror”** to **“evil”**, we recognize that those who do good (as with Jesus Himself) may find themselves suffering if they **“obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29)**. We should know who our ultimate authority is and what He requires of us. In light of the behavior of ‘God appointed’ lower authorities this can be difficult to ascertain.

This leads us to a verse in the New Testament that many might think belongs in the Old Testament.

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).

A Covenant of Grace?

Years ago, I was in a conversation with a small group of ministers on the topic of the death penalty. One strongly opposed it based upon the gracious nature of the New Covenant. Since the severe penalties for crimes are mainly seen in the Old Testament, she reasoned, our response to capital crimes in the New Covenant should be one of grace. When asked what she thought should be an appropriate response to murder, she answered “Life in prison.”

But how is life in prison an act of grace? You might argue that seems more gracious than an execution, but one is hard-pressed to somehow conclude that to put me in a cage for life is an act of grace. Grace, simply defined, means I get something that I don’t truly deserve. When we are

saved by grace through the blood of Christ, all of God's wrath is removed. We don't merely make it to higher level of hell. If one were to press her logic, criminals would receive no punishment for their crimes. A position held by no one.

The Sword

What we see in Paul's words, in the New Covenant, is the appropriate use of "**the sword**" *machairan*. The sword is a device of execution. The sword does not denote the key to a prison cell or a fine or community service. It's been said of this passage:

And then he says, *An avenger, to execute wrath, etc.* This is the same as if it had been said, that he is an executioner of God's wrath; and this he shows himself to be by having the sword, which the Lord has delivered into his hand. This is a remarkable passage for the purpose of proving the right of the sword; for if the Lord, by arming the magistrate, has also committed to him the use of the sword, whenever he visits the guilty with death, by executing God's vengeance, he obeys his commands. Contend then do they with God who think it unlawful to shed the blood of wicked men.¹

T. R. Schreiner observes that the reference

is to the broader judicial function of the state, particularly its right to deprive of life those who had committed crimes worthy of death.²

These theologians write of "**wicked men**" or "**crimes worthy of death.**" How that is determined we will take up shortly. But how have so many Christians arrived at the conclusion that capital punishment is unbiblical?

Continuity Versus Discontinuity

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 13:4). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 684). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Addressing how theological errors get legs in the church is its own monumental task. But it has been my observation that the error here amounts to implied discontinuity versus implied continuity. In other words, many Christians hold the view that unless something is repeated in the New Testament, it no longer applies (implied discontinuity). Others maintain that what God is prescribed in the Old Testament remains unless He directly repeals it (things like circumcision or ceremonial, sacrificial laws, etc.). In short, if God reveals a law, we are to continue to regard it as law unless He repeals it.

We see this common error in the way many interpret John 1:17.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

Many look at this verse (and others like) as if Jesus displaces the law. Something He clearly said He didn't do.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).

The irony of the John passage above is that we are told that the law came through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus, yet we look to Jesus for law. What we need to understand that there was grace during Moses (to which all the sacrifices pointed) and there is law with Jesus (as He taught in the Sermon on the Mount). He always did and taught that which was righteous. But the full expression of the law came through Moses and the full expression of grace came through Jesus. It was not one at the expense of the other. The one complements the other.

Civil Law

Of course, John's statement is of the law in a general sense. We see three types of law when we read the Bible. There is a ceremonial law (the priestly, sacrificial system and its ordinances), the moral law (summed up in the Ten Commandments-even more tightly summed up by Jesus in the

greatest commandment to love God and our neighbors) and the civil or judicial law (the law which requires a response by the civil magistrate).

It is this third use that Paul is writing of when he speaks of bearing the sword. This requires we answer the earlier question. Who are these “**wicked men**” whose “**crimes worthy of death**”? How is this settled?

It may be overly ambitious to seek to address every single sin (moral law violation) which should be considered a crime (civil law violation), but we can, again, put forth a principle or foundation by which these types of decisions can be determined. We do this recognizing that certain sins will have a significant negative impact on society.

It is not uncommon for those heading movements seeking to promote a questionable lifestyle or business to make the claim that what is going on the privacy of their homes or what they choose to publish or view has nothing to do with the wider population. “What do you care what I do in the privacy of my home or what I choose to watch” is a common mantra. But we have seen the privacy mantra evolve into parades and sneak its way into grade school curriculums.

The Scriptures are not silent on this issue. The Old Testament does provide a model which lays a foundation upon which we can build a proper understanding of that which falls into the category of criminal activity—a category where use of “**the sword**” is appropriate. This is found in the civil codes (Leviticus 20 is a good place to start in examining these law) of the Old Testament. These passages of Scripture generally make the world (and many Christians) bristle in discomfort since they include the death penalty (the sword) for many infractions that in our current culture are ignored, winked at, approved or celebrated.

We must keep in mind that it is not a mere picking up of the laws of Israel, in any given Old Testament era, and seeking to plop them into 21st century Los Angeles. Unlike Israel, we do not have a king and prophets addressing, with clarity, our current socio-political condition. This is why we would not advocate the type of “holy wars” we read of in the Old Covenant which would require direct prophetic instruction.

General Equity

Nonetheless, the civil codes of the Old Testament do provide a model which should serve to instruct us in terms of category (what should be

considered a crime handled by the state) and severity (at what level should crimes be punished). The divines of Westminster put it this way:

To them (Israel) also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require. (Exod. 21, Exod. 22:1-29, Gen. 49:10, 1 Pet. 2:13-14, Matt. 5:17, 38-39, 1 Cor. 9:8-10).³

This paragraph is a bit clearer than many people (even in the Reformed community) desire. As you can see it is not a wholesale abandonment of judicial laws given to Israel. In the New Covenant we are not obliged (notice the sentence doesn't end there) "**further than the general equity may require.**" In short, the judicial laws given to Israel provide a model to instruct us on that which is *appropriate* for and *just* in the civil arena. And we are obliged to use them in this way.

Monstrous Laws?

What you'll no doubt hear if you embrace this is how monstrous the laws of God were in the Old Testament. It is fearful how even Christians think that God must have been out of his mind to order such severe reactions and penalties for human infractions. It is here where I fear we have an epidemic of profaning the name of God within the church.

For example, in a debate between former presidential candidate, Alan Keyes, and Harvard Law School professor, Alan Dershowitz, Dershowitz sought to highlight the insanity of using the Bible as a source of sound law by pointing to the ordinance in Scripture where recalcitrant children are put to death (Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

There was a collective exhale among the audience and Keyes simply didn't address the question. Everyone left thinking the Bible teaches that if little Sally spills her milk or little Johnny sneaks out of his room to play marbles there were to be stoned. Similar to Keyes (who I really like), there church tends to ignore passages like this, much to their detriment. Many atheists and anti-Christians seize this and run as if they've found the

³ WCF 19, 4.

Achilles Heel of the Christian faith. But a more thorough examination of that particular law reveals several things often left out of the discussion.

Briefly (since this could be its own class) the children in question are old enough to “**strike his father or his mother**” (Exodus 21:15) to engage as a “**glutton and a drunkard**” (Deuteronomy 21:20), to “**curse**” his mother and father (Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9) “**curse**” *Qalal* carrying the idea of despising, disrespecting, holding and speaking in contempt against, etc.

Add to this that the parents in the Ten Commandments serve as the archetype of authority. It is the parents, in the application of this violation, who are called to bring their rebellious child to the elders at the city gates where he is executed. What is being addressed, in this highly misunderstood code given to us in the Old Testament, is the complete, premeditated, reckless abandonment of the respect of authority (with the child’s knowledge of the consequences). This behavior left unchecked in society yields numerous victims.

It is also critical to understand that even though the penalties for these sins are very severe, even in the Old Testament you seldom see the penalties enforced. David certainly should have been convicted of adultery and murder had God so providentially determined. This does not mean there is something wrong with the penalty (which is where our natural mind inevitably turns) but that God has been forbearing and merciful.

Also, it is not the position of those who believe in general equity that God’s laws are to be enforced in a vigilante style. There is a process to establishing laws which must be respected. This may vary in different lands with different forms of government (again, more than we can address here). But it is up to a legitimate government to establish godly laws. We are not to take law into our own hands (I’m not speaking here of self-defense, but of legislative justice).

It might also be pointed out that going down this road of biblical civics requires we embrace burden of proof. Often resistance to the death penalty comes from those who point out that innocent people have often been put to death. But Deuteronomy 19 teaches that two or three witnesses is required. And if a witness of any crime is found to be a false witness

**then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.
So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy
19:19).**

For all the talk of severity of the law of God, if this were applied, almost everyone on death row in America would not be on death row.

The civil magistrate is God's "**minister**" and is responsible to God to faithfully discharge that duty. You may recall that I began this series speaking of an exam where I was told that Romans 13 was a proof text against the civil law of God since God appoints those in authority. My question then is the same as my question now, 'Has God not given those in authority a standard by which they are to govern?' He certainly has. And it is all but ignored.

A Fortiori

One might argue that we are so far from the law of God, how could be possibly begin to implement these laws. We begin by knowing what the laws are and what they require. Then we make decisions, and vote for those who are willing to make decisions, that most closely reflect those laws. And this can be done *a fortiori*, meaning all the more or with greater force. For example, the Scriptures teach that kidnapping should be punished by death. We may live in a land where we're nowhere near that penalty for that crime. But how much more should we vote for candidates or laws that require severe punishments for manstealing!

Just for the Unjust

One last point, lest this message merely sound as if it is merely addressing the betterment of culture. But it goes much deeper than this. It has salvific consequences. Peter writes:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18a).

But when the law of God is dismissed in an arena as huge as the world of government, that which reveals to us that we are "**unjust**" (*adikos*, meaning unrighteous) no longer serves that purpose. If the Apostle Paul lived in a culture where covetousness was celebrated, how would it have served to reveal to him that he was a sinner in need of a Savior?

What nations create when they develop a system of justice which ignores the due consequences of sins-sins which deserve death, is a people who will never think they need someone to die in their place? 'Why do I need Jesus to die for my sins', someone might ask, 'my sins aren't worthy of death! My sins are to be celebrated.' And when we celebrate with them, we aid in the damning of their souls.

Questions for Study

1. How does one begin to approach political tranquility (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is the duty of people in relation to civil magistrates (page 3)?
3. Does the New Covenant mean we should not prosecute criminals? Explain (pages 3, 4).
4. What does the "sword" signify in Romans 13:4 (page 4)?
5. Explain continuity versus discontinuity in the reading of Scripture (pages 4, 5).
6. What are the different types of law we read of in Scripture (pages 5, 6)?
7. How do we decide which sins should be considered crimes (page 6)?
8. What is "general equity" (pages 6, 7)?
9. How do you answer someone who believes God's laws in the Old Testament are monstrous (pages 7, 8)?
10. Explain a proper use of the law which requires the execution of rebellious children (page 7, 8)?
11. Would there be more or less people on death row if we implemented the law of God in the civil arena (page 8)?
12. How does the neglect of God's law in the civil arena have consequences for the salvation of souls (page 9)?

