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Romans 13:1-7 “Christian Citizenship”

Intro. How do you feel when you meet up with a police officer? Often it depends on the situation. If someone is robbing you and a police officer shows up, they can be a hero to you. On the other hand, if you see an officer in your rear view mirror with flashing blue lights, you may not be so happy to see him. Sometimes people get rather upset with the police officer, even though he is just doing his job. Yet I’m going to show you from God’s Word today that you should always treat the police officer with honor and respect, even when you are being pulled over for something.

This text of Scripture continues a theme regarding God’s will in the various relationships of life. Beginning with chapter 12, we have seen God’s will for our lives in the church. We have seen God’s will for our lives in our relationship with one another as Christians. Then, last week, we leaned more about God’s will concerning how to respond to those who hurt us. Now, we will learn God’s will for our lives in our relationship to the government. So this section is not a parenthesis. The obligations in our subjection to civil authorities belong to “the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (12:2).

This subject was very relevant to those to whom Paul wrote for several reasons. In the mind of the authorities, Christianity was associated with Judaism, which had a track record of rebellion of against Gentile authority.¹ Yet Christians were to develop a different reputation if possible. Paul had to battle false charges of rebellion against the government before. Some charged in Acts 17:6-7, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too... and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.” So Paul knew that this teaching regarding submission and respect toward the government would be needed. In fact, within the next decade this issue would become especially important with the onset of persecution by the government. There was also within the Christian community the danger of perverted notions of freedom, especially in view of the kingship and lordship of Christ.

This subject is also relevant to us today. In our day disobedience to governmental law is not confined to a few hundred criminals. Disobedience to government laws is widespread. Traffic laws are frequently disobeyed. Cheating on income taxes is increasing, even by government officials themselves! A significant percentage of the population violates our drug laws, and many other crimes are committed in association with the drug problem. Theft in various forms is increasing, not only among the poor, but white collar crime is becoming a greater problem. Furthermore, since our government has mandated the legalization of abortion, gambling, pornography, and so forth, some have resorted to illegal & even violent activities to combat these vices. I believe this text of Scripture will address whether they are right or wrong.

So against the background of widespread disobedience to the law, what is the Christian to do? Are we to go ahead and disobey the law “because every body else is?” Paul will answer that question for us in our text today.

So let us look into our text and see what Christian citizenship is all about.

¹ Many held on the ground of Dt. 17:15 that to acknowledge Gentile rule was sinful.

I. WE ARE TO SUBMIT TO CIVIL AUTHORITIES

Paul says in v.1, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities.” “Be subject” (*hupotasso*) is the military word for obedience. It gives the picture of a commanding officer giving an order, and all under him are to obey that order. In the middle voice it speaks of willing obedience, not reluctant or forced obedience. We ought to have an attitude of submission to the government, not an attitude of rebellion. This obedience is not optional. Paul says in v.5, “Therefore you must [*anagke*-a necessity] be subject....” So we are to submit to the laws of our governmental bodies whether you like them or not. That is a Christian duty.

Ever since the days of Adam & Eve, we have had a problem with submission to authority. Some are more prone to rebellion than others, but we all tend to want to do *our* will, and not what someone else commands us to do. So Paul gives a series of reasons why we should submit to government authorities. First of all:

A. Government Is Ordained of God – In the last of v.1 Paul gives the first reason, “For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” The word “authority” expresses the right to rule. Human government is a divine institution, instituted by God when Noah came out of the ark (Gen. 9:5, 6). Do you remember what the world was like before the flood? It became exceedingly wicked. Government was established to curb wickedness, as we shall talk about in just a moment. The very existence of government is due to the fact that God ordained it. If we did not have government, we would have anarchy. Government has to be extremely evil & corrupt than to be worse than anarchy. In our own civilization, if every individual had liberty to do exactly as he pleased for only three days, all would be chaos. In His providence, God protects man from the ravages of unbridled sin by raising up civil authority.

So when you obey the laws of the government, you are not just obeying government. You are also obeying God. As a Christian you must understand that.

The various offices of civil authority are appointed by God. But the individuals in these offices are not always ordained of God. We know that Satan & his demons have a great deal to do with various governments. God is not responsible for the sins of the tyrants, but only that the authority to rule comes originally from God.

Paul gives another good reason for obedience to government:

B. Disobedience Leads to Punishment – Beginning in the last of v.2, Paul says, “those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil.” This is probably the main reason many people will obey the law. So if you want to stay out of trouble, obey all the laws of the government.

Have you ever experienced punishment for breaking the law. Most of us have at least received a traffic ticket and been fined.

Here we see one of the primary God-ordained roles of government, which is to punish evildoers. Peter also affirmed in 1 Peter 2:14 that government officials “are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers.” In the last of v.4, “wrath” should be regarded as the wrath of God. Government is authorized to execute God-ordained wrath upon those who commit crime. Yet there is the tendency in present-day liberal thinking to suppress this all-important aspect of the magistrate’s authority. The liberals have succeeded in getting our society to be soft on crime. They say that when people commit crimes it’s not their fault. It’s because of their environment,

or because of their economic condition, or because they have some behavioral disorder. Those may be factors in why they commit crime, but when government doesn't carry out their God-ordained function of punishing evil swiftly and decisively, crime will only escalate as it has the past several decades.

Paul mentions the sword (*machaira*) as the tool of punishment in v.4. To exclude the right of the death penalty when the nature of the crime calls for such is contrary to that which the sword signifies and executes. Capital punishment is affirmed in both the Old and New Testaments.

So if you break the law, and you are convicted & ordered to pay a fine or serve time in jail, just accept the fact that government is doing its job, and accept your punishment. Pay your debt to society, learn from the experience, and move on with your life. Furthermore, we are to elect judges and legislators who will follow God's plan regarding punishing evil doers.

Another reason for obeying the law is this:

C. Obedience & Doing Good Should Bring Praise from the Government – Paul says in the last of v.3, “Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.” Likewise, Peter also affirmed in 1 Peter 2:14 that government officials “are sent by him...for the praise of those who do good.” The government is not only to punish evil, but also “praise” the doer of good. The praise could be expressed by saying that good behavior secures good standing in the state, a status to be cherished and cultivated. Government officials tend to be more lenient on those who normally do good, but occasionally make a mistake. And doing good & living by the law brings its own reward of positive self-esteem.²

I want to challenge the government officials who hear this message to think of some ways you can praise those who normally do good, and live by the law. One example would be to change the tax law. Do you realize that in many cases those couples who make a life-long commitment to each other in marriage often pay more in taxes than the couple with the same income who lives together without the commitment of marriage? There is something wrong with that picture. It ought to be the other way around!

In this text Paul gives another reason for obedience to government:

D. Disobedience Leads to a Guilty Conscience – Paul says in v.5, “Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.” If you disobey the law, you may get by without punishment, but your conscience should bother you. Furthermore, we are not to subject ourselves to government just to avoid a guilty conscience, but also out of a sense of obligation to God. The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:13, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake...” Your conscience as a Christian will lead you obey the law even if you know that no human officer is watching, because you understand that God is watching. Conscience will go a long way toward controlling people's behavior.

And I must say this: children and young people of our society should get spiritual & moral training from their parents and the church. These morals should be reinforced by society. When that happens, they will do right and avoid the wrong largely because of an *inward* moral influence from their conscience, and an understanding that God knows their every deed, whether good or bad. That inward influence goes with them wherever they go. That is why someone said,

² It is taken for granted also that the State will not act in violation of its own ideals, and identify itself with the bad. It might seem that Paul is oblivious to the possibility of injustice in government, but he had personally experienced mistreatment from authorities.

“Developing the mind is important, but developing a conscience is the most precious gift parents can give their children.”³

On the other hand, do you know what will happen to a society that tears down the very things that instill a good moral conscience? You will have widespread lawlessness. We are now reaping the fruit that we have sown the last 40 years. The moral training of children is seriously disrupted by the breakup of the home. Our society has removed the Bible from our classrooms, the 10 Commandments from our schools and courthouses, and removed other reinforcements of moral law & conscience. Except for topics such as environmentalism and racism, our schools no longer teach moral absolutes of right & wrong, but they teach that ethics is just a matter of choices. And as our society continues to fail to reinforce a moral conscience in our children & youth, mark my word: we will not be able to put enough police officers on the streets to control the crime that will take place. Lawlessness will abound, as is happening in Mexico today. More and more people today are committing crimes and not feeling bad about it.

The real solution is for our society to turn back to God, and the parents of our society to get back to teaching their children right from wrong, and bringing their children to Sunday School & church on a regular basis to learn the Word of God!

It is clear that we are to submit to the laws of the government. Now let us consider:

II. THE EXCEPTION TO THIS SUBMISSION

A. Generally, No One Is Exempt – Paul says in v.1, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities.” “Every soul” means every person.⁴ No individual or class of individuals is exempt from the duties of citizenship. Government officials are not exempt. They should especially obey the laws they create for the rest of society. The rich are not exempt. Christians are not exempt, even though we are just pilgrims passing through, on our way to a better kingdom. Yet we have a tendency in human nature to think that laws apply to everyone else. The human heart can swell with such pride that the individual counts himself above and beyond the law. But no Christian is to be a law unto himself. Even though the Christian has been “transferred into the kingdom of the Son of His love,” he still lives in human society, and he must shoulder the obligations of mass citizenship.

Yet having said that, I can this point:

B. We Are Only Exempt When Disobedience to God Would Result – In these verses there are no expressed qualifications or reservations to the duty of subjection. But we are compelled to take account of one exception. We cannot but believe that Paul would have endorsed and practiced the word of Peter and other Apostles: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). To obtain, by lawful means, the removal or alternation of an unjust or unreasonable law is part of our duty. But even where law is hard and unreasonable, legitimate protest, not disobedience, is the duty of the Christian. Christians will voice their “No” to Caesar’s unauthorized demands more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say “Yes” to all of his authorized demands. But be sure that you have a clear-cut biblical reason for disobeying the law of man. You need to be very careful here. Another safeguard against the sinful human heart would be to consult a godly Christian, and make sure they agree with you on this.

³ John Gray in Quotable Quotes, *Readers Digest*.

⁴ The word is translated “every” because it does not have the definite article.

For example, suppose you were serving in the military or in the police force in Hitler's Germany. And you were commanded to arrest Jews, and you know that they would be sent away to die without fair trial. Would you obey human law? Or would you stand firm and obey God rather than man?

Tonight I will preach about Daniel, who was told by the government that he could not pray to His God for 30 days; he could only offer petition to the king. Daniel could not obey that command, because it was contrary to the clear command of God's Word to put no other gods before the true God. Furthermore, to go 30 days without prayer would have been a clear violation of God's will. So Daniel obeyed the higher authority of God in that situation, and God vindicated him by delivering him from the lions' den.

As long as the constitution gives us the right to the free exercise of religion, we should not have to face the kind of situation Daniel faced. Yet we must be prepared to obey God over man if and when that day comes.

I have shared with you several reasons why we should submit to the government. I have shared that no one is exempt, except in rare cases. Finally, let us consider together:

III. THE EXAMPLES TO THIS SUBMISSION

As we submit to the authority of government, Paul outlines for us 2 basic duties.

A. Pay Your Taxes – Paul says in v.6, “For because of this you also pay taxes....” The word “pay” in the Greek text (*teleo*) could either be a statement or a command. It is probably a statement, explaining why we pay taxes. Since it is necessary for the Christian to put himself in subjection to the authorities, he pays taxes, for that is one of his responsibilities. If the magistrate is to perform the ministry which is given him of God, he must have the material means for the discharge of his labors. The peace and order which we enjoy, we owe to our civil government; our lives are preserved from injury and our property from theft and violence through its protection. God tells us to pay the cost of this protection. Government is expensive, so taxes are paid to support it. We know that some revenue will be unwisely used, but how taxes are spent is not our primary responsibility. We are to pay them. Jesus Himself said in reference to a tax question, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's” (Mk. 12:17).

In v.7a Paul mentions some specific taxes we are to pay as examples. He says, “Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs....” “Taxes” refers to a tax levied on persons and property. “Customs” refers to the tax levied on goods and corresponds to customs payments.

So as Christians, we are to be sure we pay all our taxes that we are required to pay. Yes, we must pay the 10% meal tax when you eat out in Colonial Heights. You must pay the car tax & other personal property taxes. If you own home you must pay your property tax. It's time to prepare out Federal & State income taxes. Be sure you do not under report your income, or overstate your deductions.

B. Respect & Honor Civil Servants and Authorities – In the last of v.7 Paul says we are to give “fear to whom fear” is due. “Fear” refers to veneration and respect. Respect and honor are paid to earthly rulers, not in view of their prestige and influence, but because Christian conscience sanctions their place of service in God's plan. Children of Christian families must be taught respect for the policemen. I remember when I was a young person in the hippy days of the

late 60's and early 70's; policemen were called pigs, smokies, and the fuzz. I don't know what they are called today, because I don't hang around people who show disrespect toward policemen, as clearly commanded in Scripture. And young people, you should also show respect to your teachers and principals at school.

In the last of v.7 Paul says we are to give "honor to whom honor" is due. We are commanded to "honor the king" in 1 Peter 2:17b. We do not have a king, but we do have a president. We must always speak respectfully of the president, even if we disagree with his policies. Let us not make the same mistake that the liberals made in reference to President Bush. So often they spoke of him with such disrespect. The same holds true of other government officials.

Paul tells us in v.4 why we should respect & honor our civil servants & law enforcement officers, "For he is God's minister to you for good...." We should respect & appreciate their good work. Furthermore, Paul says in the last of v.6, "they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing." The word "minister" here (*leitourgos*) is a different word from v.4 (*diakonos*). It is the word used for a religious servant. The ruler, like the priest, discharges a divinely ordained service. Those of you who work for the government should also realize that you are working for God.

We should also respect & honor them for their devotion to their service. The word translated "attending continually" in v.6 is the same word found in 12:12 translated "continuing steadfastly." There it refers to our devotion to prayer. We are especially to commend & respect those public servants who are truly devoted to their service to the community, and who spend many long hours at their job.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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