

Civil Government

Romans 13:1-7

The Lord Jesus said render to Caesar the things that are Caesars.

The Apostles in Acts insisted they must obey God rather than men.

Peter wrote in his first letter to submit to kings and governors as those in authority, who punish evil doers and praise the good.

And while Paul tells Timothy to pray for those in authority – that we might live a quiet and peaceful life – there is no other passage in the Bible that touches on civil government as these verses do.

The Bible says here: what is Caesar's is Caesar's because what is God's is God's. Your duty to the authorities is not apart from your duty to God. Why? Because government is of God.

At the same time, this has been a tortured text to support unlimited civil authority of kings which may never be disobeyed; and limited civil authority, and the right, even the duty to resist civil rulers when they are no longer *of God*. Which one is right? For both of them cannot be true.

In Romans 12:19, Paul wrote to give place to wrath. Let God exercise vengeance – that is not your job. But this chapter says it is the job of civil rulers. They have it in their power to exercise justice and punishment on others in the name of God.

But I can't believe that is the alone reason for writing this paragraph, or this would look very different. Rather these verses are in a straight

line with all of 12 and into 14. This is part of the will of God introduced to his glory beginning back in 12:1-2.

Listen how Stott outlines it:

- A. 12:1-2 Your relationship to God: consecrated bodies and renewed minds.
- B. 3-8 Your relationship to yourself: thinking soberly about your gifts.
- C. Your relationship to one another: love in the family of God – 9-13
- D. 14-21 Your relationship to your enemies: not retaliation but service.
- E. Now your relationship to the state – conscientious citizenship.
- F. Next in 8-10 Your relationship to the law: love to neighbor is the law's fulfillment
- G. 11-14 is your relationship to the present age – living in the already, not yet.
- H. Then a long section – Your relationship to the weak: welcoming and not despising or judging or offending them – 14:1-15:13

So this helps us know why this passage speaks much on our duty, and little – except in a broad way – on the duties of civil leadership.

There are two sections here –

1. 1-4 is the **matter** of your subjection to the government
2. 5-7 is the **manner** of your subjection

The **matter** answers the questions “what?” and “why?” What is your place before rulers, and why are we obedient? So their place and yours.

The **manner** in 5-7 answers “how?” How are you are to submit – Paul says it is necessary you submit – how? Heartily, conscientiously, not

merely pragmatically because you are afraid of punishment; then fiscally, verse 6, paying those dirty rotten taxes! Respectfully in verse 7 – not calling them dirty rotten taxes, but honorably, respectfully!

But we focus on what is the Nature of Government in 1-4.

You are to submit for two reasons. And those reasons are not because it is practical, convenient, or beneficial. You submit because of God.

God's authority greets us in 1-2. There is no authority except of God, and established by God. So should you resist, you resist not just government but God.

Then God's righteousness shines in 3-4. Government is a minister, a servant of God for good, for right. Then government is a cause of fear to the evil, the bearer of the sword to avenge the practices of evil.

Now this is why the text is as much against tyranny in civil government – a minister of God – as it is against anarchy in the subjects to submit to proper authority.

This is a stroke of genius, really, on Paul's part under the wisdom of the Spirit.

“It deserves notice and praise, that in explaining to the Romans their duty as citizens, the apostle has shown the finest address. For while he seemed only to plead the cause of the officials with the people, he quietly conveys the most wholesome instruction to heathen rulers, who he knew were too proud to receive advice from teachers of his character and nation. For telling the rulers that they are the servants of God for good, he taught them the purpose of their office, and showed them that their sole aim in executing it ought to be, to promote the

happiness of their people; and that as soon as they lose sight of this, their government degenerates into tyranny.” Macknight

So the responsibilities of submission are explicit; the responsibilities of leadership are implicit.

And both flow from where? Above! From God.

Look at Paul’s repetition: ‘no authority except from God’, ‘established by God,’ ‘the ordinance of God’; ‘a minister of God for good’ and ‘His avenger to bring wrath on evil.’

This is our foundation then. Let us consider briefly the four corners to this divine foundation, in four points – Government is OF God, Government is UNDER God, Government is IN God, and Government will STAND BEFORE God.

Number One, Government is OF God

God establishes or ordains government. Those who resist government are resisting God. “There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.”

This is a necessary message to Jewish Christians. Paul doesn’t just say obey, but as stronger word, “submit”.

The Jews had a history of strongly opposing Roman authority. They boasted of their independence. One whole part of them were called ‘Zealots’ for their political fire. But the NT as we have seen teaches the need for submission under God to these authorities. Why? Because they are appointed by God; they are OF God.

This was not just for Jews but Gentile Christians stepping into their new life with new light and new liberties. Peter and Paul warn of using liberty as a cloak for evil.

God has ordained government. It is for our good. Order in society is the proper framework in which to live life by the love of the Lord.

Even these pagan Caesars are here called, God's ministers.

They were hostile to the church to be sure. Claudius had expelled the Jews and the Christians from Rome in 44 AD. Nero was not yet so mad against the Christians – that was coming.

But Paul had OT instruction on kings and rulers, not only in Israel but in all the nations. And, let us not forget, Jesus had come! Jesus has been made Lord, who will judge the living and the dead! Jesus who is the King of kings, Lord of lords, the ruler of the kings of the earth – Rev. 1.5.

Government is OF God, and we must not say otherwise or we are contradicting Romans 13:1.

Secondly, Government is UNDER God.

God appointed government as his servants, beneath him to do his will. Psalm 119:91 says 'All things in the earth are his servants'. Governors are not excluded.

This truth has been underrated or overrated by Christians.

On the one hand, civil government is necessary in our fallen world. The sinful and wicked are in need of restraint, in need of the threat of the sword, and in need of the sword itself in extreme cases.

But as people assign too much to government, or too little, we run into great trouble.

When government does not live up to its calling from God, or when governors go beyond into areas of life that is not theirs, we run into horrors.

Their powers are limited – limited by God since they are defined by God and no other.

Hodge says, “They are to be obeyed as magistrates in the exercise of their lawful authority, and their lawful authority goes not an inch further than what God has ordained – not what man has ordained, but what God has ordained.”

He then illustrates by the powers of parents over children and husbands to wives.

Government can do some good to be sure. And they can do great evil. Who can deny this? 100 million – that’s the estimate of those who died at the hands of their government in the last century!

Government cannot do all good; they should not be expected to do what is not theirs to do! They cannot bring in the great society, the new deal, or the new world order. And when they try, their remedies are worse than the problems.

Look at France in the 1700s. The government thought to help the nation by getting rid of the idea of the sinfulness of man. We will return to nature, and treat everyone as though all are good.

What happened? They slaughtered each other! The Reign of Terror beheaded some 17,000 French by their relentless guillotines!

When the state provides for roads, order, a judicial system, punishments, an army to protect from enemies and police against evil doers, as Rome was doing, then they are under God, and to be submitted to. When Nero comes and says, ‘worship me as a god’ – the answer is no.

Government is OF God, UNDER God; third, government is IN God.

Government wields the power of God! Life and death are in their hands!

Calvin says in his works: “The Lord is the King of kings... who is to be heard alone, above all, for all, and before all. We are subjects to those men who preside over us, but no otherwise than in him.”

Daniel records that ‘the Most High rules in the kingdom of men – he does according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.’

Proverbs 8:15-16 “By me kings reign and princes decree justice; by me princes rule and nobles, all the judges of the earth.”

Christ is sovereign – all authority in heaven and earth is His.

So we are conscience bound to civil government, to our judges and mayors, police and presidents. And we cannot dismiss their authority because of their personal impiety or immorality.

Yes, they should be better men and women; yes, they should kiss the Son and obey! Yes, they should be continually asking themselves – am I a blessing of God to others, or a curse? Do I rule in the fear of God?

But this passage is asking you: are you easily led in the right way? Are you bowing the knee to Christ so as to subject yourself to his civil governors?

Government is of God, under God, in God and lastly – SHALL STAND BEFORE God.

All men shall stand before God and give an account, and rulers are especially to stand before him. All God's servants must give an account of their stewardship, for what they have done with what God gave them.

And all the murders, oppressions, corruptions, back-room deals, discriminations, cruelties, robberies, over-taxations, heavy-handedness, and abuses, will find no friend in the throne of God.

William Plumer:

Let Magistrate's never forget that they will be judged by God himself, and perhaps punished in this world, and, if they die without repentance, surely they will be punished in the world to come.

Let them not forget that with God there is no respect of persons. Soon he will say, give an account of your stewardship, for you may be no longer steward.

Oh how will the abused, the wronged, the robbed, the whipped, the insulted and the persecuted rise before the eternal Judge, and clank their chains to the shame and everlasting contempt and confusion of tyrants and persecutors, who once bore a scepter or a whip in this world.

Government is OF God = it is something that is good.

It is UNDER God and IN God = that is where its authority and power lie.

It is STANDING BEFORE God = to be reviewed by Him.

All are under authority, because all are under God, under the Lord Christ! Let us bow the knee to Him and confess him as King over all... with humility ... and with thanksgiving to yield up all to him...

Next time – we come to the sword God places in their hands.