

FEW PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE have been studied and analyzed over the years more than the passage for our study today (Romans 13:1–7.) ... (*And frankly*)... This history of trying to understand Paul's instructions... have largely been... the history of attempts to **avoid** what this passage plainly seems to be saying. You will see why... as we read it together. Let's do that now (in its entirety.)

Romans 13:1-7

Almost everyone who has written about *Romans 13* since 1945... (eventually) brings the situation of *Hitler's Germany* into the discussion. ... "Was - (even **Hitler**) - to be obeyed?" ... [P A U S E] ...

I hardly know of any other passage where so many believers (just like you and I) **do not** have as their PRIMARY concern: "*What does this Bible passage mean?*" ... but instead "*Where is the exception?*" ... We almost feel desperate to find a way to avoid thinking that totalitarian governments are to be obeyed – no matter what.

What a source of controversy these verses have been! ... One Bible commentator (J. C. O'Neill) wrote: "*These seven verses have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses in the New Testament.*" ... That is probably **not** true. ... But they have certainly puzzled many and caused unhappiness among some scholars.

J. C. O'Neil (being one of those) went on... and attempted to eliminate these seven verses from Paul's letter... writing that they are **un**-Pauline (whatever that means)... and must have come (rather) from a **Stoic** source. Such persons think the verses have been **inserted** (later) by someone else.

O'Neill (and others) try to prove their allegation by pointing out that there is nothing quite like this section anywhere else in Paul's writing.

Well... this is true... but that does **not** mean that Paul did not write it! ... Paul's letters have quite a few unique sections. ... Furthermore... it can be argued from the immediate context of Paul's letter... that these seven verses make a great deal of sense to be here.

Please recall with me what we studied (just last week) in the previous set of verses. ... "*We must not seek our own revenge... but leave room for the wrath of God.*" Paul urged believers to allow God to judge. (And) **now** we see that one reason why we can do that... is because God has ordained government as the institution to carry out His judgment in this world. ... So Romans 13:1-7 is a *natural follow-up* to the immediately preceding verses.

But once we recognize that there is no reason to doubt that these are the Apostle Paul's inspired words of Holy Scripture... we are immediately **dis**comforted with a yearning... because Paul did not write more... to clarify our natural questions. Paul makes no attempt to answer them... (he doesn't bother)... even though he (*no doubt*) would have known they would arise in his readers. ... He simply lets the plain meaning stand.

But Paul (!) "*What about limits?*"... "*Would it ever be right to rebel against an unjust or tyrannical government?*" ... **And** from a more modern viewpoint: "*What about our own American War of Independence? If we had been living then, what side should we have been on, with England or with the colonists?*" ... (Even more recently) massive amounts of Americans (Christians included) believe that the current president of the United States was not duly elected by the people... and many believed the same about

the previous president. ... Are Christians free to join protest movements when we believe that the government is illegitimate...?

But Paul does not make any attempt to answer our natural questions. He simply lets the plain meaning of his words stand... Why? Would he not have been able to anticipate our strong desire for him to clarify our thoughts?

It is unlikely that Paul would not have known. His own nation's recent history had the Maccabean Rebellion. About 200 years before Paul penned this letter... the tyrannical Seleucid ruler over Israel -*Antiochus IV* - sought to eradicate all Jewish faith. He outlawed Torah... forbid circumcision... set up an idol in the Holy-of-Holies of Jerusalem's Temple... and sacrificed pigs on the Temple's alter. He also mercilessly slaughtered many Jews.

The MacAbee family led a revolt using intense gorilla warfare. Eventually the Jews overthrew him... and the Jewish holiday - Hanukkah – celebrates the overthrow of this oppressive government authority. Hanukkah was celebrated in both Jesus' and Paul's day (known as the Festival of Lights.)

Paul knew was not naïve about oppressive governments. He lived in the midst of one. At the time in which he wrote this epistle... the Roman empire was agitated with civil dissensions. One emperor followed another in rapid succession. The throne was often seized... not by right... but by crime. ... Different claimants would rise... and their claims would excite controversy. ... Claudius had been put to death by poison... Caligula in a violent manner... Nero was a tyrant.

Many of the early Christians that Paul wrote to... were composed of Jewish converts. The Jews had long been under Roman **oppression**... and had borne the foreign yoke with great **uneasiness**. They had regarded the whole heathen Empire... as founded in a system of **idolatry**... as opposed to the **One True God** and His kingdom. They saw Rome as an abomination.

With these feelings... Jewish converts had become **Christians**... and it would be natural that their former sentiments would linger inside of them... **after** their conversion. ... How far they should submit (if at all) to heathen magistrates... was a **question of deep interest**. ...Do you think Paul did **not** know this...? ... And yet Paul does not make any attempt to answer the natural questions. **He simply lets the plain meaning of his words stand**. ...Why?

Some scholars say that it was because the Apostle wanted to prevent Christians (amidst these **egotistical** agitations... crimes... and revolutions for selfish causes)... from entering into them. The thinking is that the Apostle wished to **guard** Christians from taking an active part in the immoral political affairs of that day. ... (And this might have some merit.)

Let's get a little **historical** context. Not only do we need to be mindful of **literary** context (the verses before and after or passage) but we also should know some things about the **context** of what was going on... in the lives of those to whom Paul first wrote this letter.

When Paul wrote this letter... there was a growing discontent with the power of the government. ... The Roman historian *Tacitus* tells us that

there was considerable resistance in the middle 50s to paying indirect taxes... culminating in a tax revolt in A.D. 58. (This would have been right around the time Paul wrote this letter to the Romans.)

These forces at work in Roman society... may have led the Roman Christians to question their need to obey the government. ... Greatly intensifying such a question... was the indirect influence of the Jewish Zealot movement. ... Some of the Christians in Rome were Jewish... and some may well have sympathized with the increasingly prominent and popular revolutionary program of the Zealots... who were seeking to rescue Israel from Roman oppression by violence.

Paul's contemporary situation (all the selfish agitations and the current tax revolt) may be the reason why he did not appear to put any "exception clauses" in his letter – even though it screams for them. He never intended to write a comprehensive treatise about government.

(He knew that Scripture has other passages... from which those questions that "scream out" could be answered.) I believe that what Paul was doing... was answering an immediate need that he saw. He wanted to "tip the scale back into balance" for those who were viewing all government as undeserving of our respect.

(But) I intend to show you... as we dig into these verses... how Paul left plenty of room for those other passages of Scripture to address what we wanted him to tackle for us (here.) ... (So... hold-on... please.)

Romans 13:1-2

We must submit ourselves to the governing authorities. ... Why? ... The answer is because of the sovereignty of God. There is no authority except that which God has established... Those who exercise authority do so... because God has established them in their positions.

We have to take God's sovereignty seriously. ... It is real easy for us to accept God's sovereignty over government - when we are given Christian rulers... or people of high moral character... or (at least) people with whom we share the same political views. ... But the point (which is very clear)... is that the matter of obedience to those in authority... cannot be taken lightly (as we are so often inclined to do.)

To be sure... men will abuse and misuse the institution of a God-ordained government... just as man has abused and misused every other institution in history... including the God-ordained Church... and the God-ordained family. ... Because of man's exploitation ... it does not mean that these institutions are bad... or that they should be forsaken. ... It simply means that men are sinners... and this is the way that rebellious man behaves with institutions God has gifted to us.

As a matter of fact... it is because of man's rebellion... that there must be human government. It is to maintain order... until the final and ultimate rule of Jesus Christ is established. ... Human government is better than anarchy... and despite the fact that almost every time we pick up a newspaper we seem to read of corruption in government... we must still recognize the state as an essentially divine gift.

(LISTEN!) Evil men are elected to power... and may seize power. They (or the ones who put them into power) may have no thought of God at all... but

the very fact that sovereign God permits them to seize the reigns of government... means that God has a purpose to fulfill. ... It is a saying well worth considering that "*people get the kind of government they deserve.*" We certainly know from Israel's history that some of her governments were God's judgments on them. ... Governments may be weak or strong... just or oppressive... benevolent or cruel... wise or foolish... but in each case God has His way and moves His own plans forward. ... From our viewpoint the strands may seem tangled... meaningless... hopelessly knotted... unequal and wrong. ... But the tapestry God is weaving is perfect.

We need to have firmly in our hearts and minds - that God ordains human government for two reasons. Paul gives them in verses 3 and 4.

Romans 12:3-4

God ordains government for these two reasons: **1.) to restrain evil**... and **2.) to reward good**. Let me say that again because this is so important. A God-ordained government exists for these two reasons: **1.) to restrain evil**... and **2.) to reward good**. (I will come back to these a little later. It is one of those openings I spoke of earlier... where Paul may be allowing other Scripture to inform us about questions we may have. ... But for now... I would like to side-step those... and raise a different question.)

Have you ever heard this: "*You can't legislate morality?*" ... (You can't legislate morality...) That is absolutely true. You can't legislate morality. There is not a law on earth that can make you moral.

(But follow me on this...) That's the reason why we must have laws that legislate against immorality. ... No!... Law can't make you good - only

God can make you good. ... Government is not here to make you good. Government is here to restrain evil.

There's not a law on earth that can make you honest - so we have to have laws that keep you from stealing. ... There's not a law on earth that can keep you from lying - so we have to have laws against falsehood. (You see)... you don't legislate morality... but you **do** legislate **against immorality**... and thank God for government which is here to restrain evil.

Government restrains evil by use of a sword... according to verse 4. That means they have the power to afflict punishment - and even to take life. ... Romans 13:4 is a real problem for any believer who says capital punishment... (the death penalty)... is wrong. They have to contend with this verse. ... God has given the sword to rulers... and with it... the authority to punish - and even to execute... so that evil can be restrained.

Romans 13:5

In verses 3 and 4 along with the first part of verse 5... we find some good reasons to obey civil government. But then... just when we think Paul has made his point thoroughly and is about to wrap up... he adds almost as an afterthought, "*Oh, yes, and also because of conscience.*" ... The full verse says: "*Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.*"

Now... conscience is not a small thing of little importance - but rather a large thing of very great importance! ... God has quickened the Christian's moral nature so that he or she not only knows what is right (as opposed to

what is wrong) but also has been given a true **desire and ability** to do what conscience demands.

One writer has compared the human conscience to a sundial. It is not a perfect timepiece... but it is fairly accurate—as long as the sun is shining on it. ... Suppose you consult it by moonlight. ... In that case... it might tell any time at all. ... It might say that it is noon when it is actually three o'clock in the morning. ... The sundial is only valuable when the sun is shining on it. ... In the same manner... the conscience is only valuable when it is illuminated by the Word of God. ... We need people who will stand for the right and do the right "*because of conscience.*"

Now... the mention of "conscious" is (yet) another possible opening... for other Scripture passages to inform us about the questions that Romans 13 raises in us. (And we will look at some in a few minutes.)

But right now think about the role of "conscious" in whether or not you should ALWAYS obey government. ... If you DO ever involve yourself in a crusade... be sure that the position you take... is led by a conscious that has the true light of Scripture shining all over it... Make certain that you are not merely serving yourself or merely enhancing your own crusading reputation. ... Be led by a Biblically-saturated conscious... not primarily by a desire for an easier life or greater pleasure. ... And here is one area where it is all too easy - **NOT** - to be primarily led by enlightened conscious... but instead by an easier life... or greater pleasure.

Romans 13:6-7

Ever-increasing taxes are a burden... and a government is on its last legs (in my simple opinion)... when half the people get the idea they don't have to work... because the other half will take care of them... and the other half gets the idea that it does no good to work... because somebody else gets what they work for. ... Socialism... (which calls for excessive taxes)... is sinful and dangerous. ... A Frenchman said: "*France fell when people got the idea that the government was a cow to be milked - rather than a watchdog to be fed...*"

But we are to pay for our government. ... [P A U S E] ...

It is time now for me to cover what other passages of Scripture teach about dealing with government. (These are what Paul left for us to turn to... while he dealt with the immediate concern of his day that he was addressing.) I will start with a passage that deals with this issue: we are to pay for our government.

Shortly after Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem... the Pharisees sought out their enemies - the Herodians - to join them in an unholy alliance to "get Him." ... There could hardly have been two more incompatible groups. The Herodians were not a religious sect or school... but a political party.

Though they were Jews (or at least of mixed Jewish blood)... they were Roman sympathizers and supporters who favored Roman occupation and taxation. ... So they were natural enemies of the Pharisees... who were anti-Caesar and loathed paying taxes. But they (strangely) teamed up.

These unlikely groups formulated a surefire plan to ensnare the Lord. They sent a combined delegation of young Pharisees (who would hopefully appear more guileless than the older ones) and Herodians to Jesus. Their

instructions were to flatter Him (which they did)... and then ask this question: "*Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" (Matthew 22:17). The question was devilishly clever.

If Jesus answered "no" He would be branded a traitor to Caesar. If he said "yes" He would be called anti-patriotic... and Jesus' entire ministry would be discredited. (His enemies were sure they had Him.) ... But instead Jesus had them when He answered, "*You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax*" (Matthew 22:18). ... A hush came over the crowd as Jesus held the coin for all to see. Then He asked them, "*Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?*" ... "Caesar's," they replied. Then He said to them, "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's*" (Matthew 22:20, 21).

It was a brilliant answer... and all His critics could do was walk away shaking their heads in wonder.

(And) with this single sentence... our Lord established the validity of human government... while at the same time setting its limits. ... Caesar had his image on certain things... and they rightly belonged to him. BUT Jesus announced that there is a proper domain and function for human government.

God has stamped His own image on man (the intellect, the will, and the soul bear the divine stamp). ... Man may give outward things to Caesar... but the inner man belongs to God. ... Jesus was saying, "The coin is from the mint of the Roman Empire, but you are from God's mint. The coin's use is determined by its likeness, and your use is determined by the likeness

you bear." Jesus' single sentence is certainly the most important political statement ever made!

Are there times when we should not obey the government? We should never allow government to force us into not giving to God what is God's. God is to receive our worship. He asks us to gather in corporate worship.

Last year our government asked us to temporarily cease from doing that. Once we complied... government assumed a role that God did not give them. We complied because of our Biblically enlightened conscious. We wanted to keep hospitals from getting overloaded and be able to meet large caseloads. Two weeks was not an issue. But after those two weeks (plus another six) government stepped into a role that is not theirs. They assumed that it was up to government to allow the when... why... and how we can give God worship.

Jesus and His apostles never disobeyed the government for personal reasons. When they disobeyed... it was in order to follow God's clear mandates. ...Their disobedience was not cheap. They were threatened... beaten... thrown into jail... tortured... or executed for their convictions. ... Like them... if we are compelled to disobey... we must be ready to accept the consequences. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

In verse 3 and 4 of our passage... we saw that God ordains government for these two reasons: **1.) to restrain evil...** and **2.) to reward good**. This is how the government is to operate as God intends. ... But when we look at our government today... who cannot help but notice that is becoming

(every day) more and more - the exact opposite...?! It restrains good and rewards evil! It is a far cry from God's purpose.

Paul may have intentionally opened a door for what Scripture indicates (elsewhere) – that we should not submit when government authority turns against God.

The classic example of this is found in Acts 4-5 when the authorities arrested the disciples for preaching and summoned them before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish government)... ordering them not to teach the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17-20). ... Of course... the disciples went right back to their preaching. ... Brought before the high priest... they were told, "*We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name... Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.*" ... Peter and the other apostles then told them, "*We must obey God rather than men!*" (Acts 5:28- 29). **The command of God always takes precedence over the command of government. There are no exceptions.** ... [P A U S E] ...

Here is yet another possible door that Paul opened. When Paul used the word "*subjection*" ("*one must be in subjection*") in verse 5... Paul is not demanding obedience to every mandate that government makes. Paul used the word (hypotasso) which is not the word for "obey." (***That*** word is hypakouo.) ... Hypotasso is much broader and recognizes one's subordinate place in a hierarchy that is established by God... and where ***He*** sits at the pinnacle.

The parallel between a Christian's submitting to government... and a wife's submitting to her husband... might be helpful. (You see)... The wife is to

recognize that God has ordained her husband to be her “*head*” (that is... her leader and guide.) Thus... she must follow his leadership. ... But Paul would never think that a wife must always do whatever her husband demanded. Her ultimate allegiance is to God (the authority standing over her husband.)

Whenever a husband or a government orders a Christian to do something incompatible with our allegiance to God (our Higher Authority)... we must... as Peter and John put it, “*obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29).

(But please hear me loud and clear!) While we should be informed and willing to question the motives of those who govern us... we should be more demanding and more suspicious of our own motives. ... We must be careful not to be ruled by our sinful desires. ... Some of our protest may not be spiritual (at all)... but rooted in our offended pride... or hatred of any authority. ... This response is not directed by Christ or the Holy Spirit.

One final passage that discusses what Paul did not (about government)... and then I will wrap up. (This one is critical.) It concerns Jesus’ reply to Pilate at His trial in John chapter 19.

Pilate asked Jesus if He was not aware that Pilate had power either to free Him or to crucify Him. Jesus replied, “*You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above.*” (John 19:11). ... Jesus said that although Pilate had a true authority... that authority had been given to him by God... and he was therefore responsible to God for how he used it. This verse lays the groundwork for the limitations of the state's authority.

Jesus did not show disrespect to Pilate. He did not warn him that if he failed to rule justly... Jesus' followers would rise up and do their best to unseat him and the Roman government. ... Jesus knew what the governor would do... and He accepted it as from God. ... But Jesus was not **silent**. He spoke of the truth... and He reminded Pilate that Pilate was sinning and would therefore one day himself have to answer for it.

That is **our** role. ... It is our duty as Christians to speak out against the civil ruler's sins... and remind the governing authorities that they are ultimately accountable to God from whom their authority comes.

So **we** are accountable too! ... We are accountable to speak up. We do not have the power of the sword. That is reserved for the civil authorities... as Paul wrote in Romans 13:4. ... Our weapon is **truth**... And the truth is stronger than the sword. ... But woe to us... if we do not wield the sword of truth powerfully.

In today's cancel culture... you might lose your job for calling-out those who are not honest. ... You might lose your chance for promotion. You might be cut out of the leadership circle. ... No matter. You must still speak up... and you must act **justly** ...even under the threat of pressure.

... [P A U S E] ...

OK... so now... to wrap up.

Paul understood that the question of obedience to worldly authorities can be **thorny** for the Christian. After all... he wrote to the believers in Rome near the middle of Nero's reign... which would turn horrifically brutal within a few years. ... Many of us believe that today's culture is turning

horrifically brutal. What will it be like next year? One year ago... did you think that our State governor would be dictating when we can worship and how? ... We must remain meaningfully engaged and giving honor to our worldly authorities... without giving up our submission to our highest authority. And we cannot be afraid to speak about this hierarchy. ... It's a delicate balance that can be terribly difficult to maintain.

Put simply... we must obey our government... but be ready to become “*godly rebels*”... **All governments** do things that are immoral... but when a government authority commands us to go against God's clear will... we have a duty to disobey that command. Peacefully and respectfully... we must do as God commands. And we must speak up. This may result in our having to accept the consequences of our choice... which may include punishment... persecution... or having to take refuge elsewhere.

But our hope is in God – Who will never leave us or forsake us!