

Human Government a Minister of God

📖 Romans 13:3-5

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📅 January 17, 2016

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What we've said in Romans 13:1 is that the rule of thumb is that all of us are to willingly subject ourselves to the governing authorities. Elsewhere Paul says we should pray for those in governing positions so that we may have peace in our day. In other words, willing submission to and prayer for the governing authorities are essential to living in a stable and peaceful society. We should not be looking for a conflict with the government. A conflict between the citizens and a government usually doesn't turn out so well. It is better to live in peace because in that context we can enjoy stability, learn, think, be creative and enjoy propagating the gospel freely and teaching bible doctrine. Those are some reasons we should submit to governing authorities.

Paul cites two other reasons in 13:1. First, because human government is a divine institution. God is the one who gave humans authority in the first place. Second, because those who are appointed to various governing offices have been appointed to those offices by God. He is the one who sovereignly arranges history so that the rulers at any particular time are ultimately there by divine appointment. Therefore, in 13:2, it logically follows that whoever resists authority has taken a stand against the ordinance of God. We said that word "ordinance" refers to the penetration of God into the geopolitical situation so that the person He wants in the office is in the office regardless of what we think. We still have to vote responsibly from a biblical worldview, but the person who gets into office is still the person God is putting there for some purpose. And when we find ourselves with leaders in various offices and we decide to oppose them Paul says you will receive condemnation upon yourself. That just means that the governing authorities are going to take you to court and you are going to be found guilty.

We took an aside here last week to deal with instances in Scripture when believers did take a stand against governing authorities, there are many examples, many more than we cited. From those examples we found that God has not left us without witness about what to do when the government demands that we do something that opposes God's word. Basically we said three things. First, when man's laws oppose God's word then we have to follow God's word. This is because any authority that a human has is derived from God and they wouldn't have it apart from Him. So God is the higher authority and when the government denies any transcendent authority and presumes to be the ultimate authority then we have to follow God's word. There are two options as to how we deal with a state that has located all authority within itself. First, we can ask permission

to opt out. This was exemplified by Daniel when the dietary code of the king of Babylon came into conflict with the dietary code of the King of the Universe. Daniel simply asked that he be allowed to opt out. He constructed a shrewd test to convince the governing official that opting out of the king's choice food was beneficial to his appearance and intelligence. His strategy to opt out was successful and there was no need for civil disobedience. Second, we may have to commit civil disobedience. This was exemplified by Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego when king Nebuchadnezzar required that they worship a pagan idol that he had constructed. This came into direct conflict with the command against idolatry given by the King of the Universe. They simply told Nebuchadnezzar that they did not have to give him an answer concerning this and that if their God wanted to rescue them He could, but even if He did not they were not going to bow down and worship his phony idol. I think it's important to add that this refusal did not detract from their true loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. They wanted the best for Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom. It was not best for them to bow down and worship an idol. It was best for them to serve in that administration while worshipping the one true God. Their strategy was successful and God did rescue them out of the situation. So the first thing we learned was that when man's laws oppose God's word then we have to follow God's word and there are two options available; request to opt out or commit civil disobedience. Whatever choice you make you need to be prepared to accept the consequences of your choice. Second, when the government breaks the law we have to hold their feet to the fire. This was exemplified by Paul and Silas who at Philippi suffered under a misappropriation of justice when the chief magistrates ordered them to be beaten without a trial. The chief magistrates appeared to be trying to pacify the angry crowd but their actions were lawlessness. A Roman citizen could not be beaten without a trial. When they tried to skirt out of the issue by sending some policemen to release them the next day Paul held their feet to the fire saying, "No way, you guys have beaten us without a trial, now you come down here and release us yourselves." So they did and they knew they were in the wrong and they begged Paul and Silas to leave town so there would be no further repercussions. So what Paul and Silas did was hold their feet to the fire and they were successful to some extent. The authorities at least were fearful of being lawless. But Paul and Silas received no financial remuneration or justice. They were simply released and that reminds you that you may not get justice when and if you hold the government's feet to the fire. You may just have to live with them getting a little wake up call. Third, when the laws that protect Christianity are changed and Christianity is illegal then we have to be willing to go to martyrdom. This is similar to the first issue but we brought it up in the context of Rome. In Rome, in Acts 18, Gallio made a decision that officially recognized Christianity as a sect within Judaism. Since Judaism was an officially approved religion of the Roman Empire then Christianity was also officially approved. But when Nero came along and married Poppea she convinced him that Christianity was not a sect within Judaism and therefore Christianity became illegal. That is why Paul, Peter and others were either executed under Rome or imprisoned. To keep on practicing Christianity when it is illegal will result in condemnation. By application, if Christianity is made illegal in the United States and we go on practicing Christianity we may be condemned. That is what happens to many Christians in other countries. They may continue to meet underground but sometimes

they are caught and serve jail sentences or are summarily executed. This is happening to many of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the world right now. They are suffering under a government that made Christianity illegal.

As an aside, I'm not talking about what we should do as Christians when we face rogue groups like ISIS who are trying to exert authority over us. They have no legal authority to arrest and execute Christians. They are not a valid nation or government. They are a rogue group waging a war and under the rules by which they play you have one of three choices; you can convert, say the Shahadah, you can become a dhimmi, pay a tax to them, or you can fight. As a Christian two of those you can do and one you cannot do. The one you cannot do is convert. You cannot say the Shahadah. If you want to become a dhimmi understand what that is, that is saying that you will pay a tax to these Muslims and that will mean you are taking a subservient position under them, you will be of a lower class in that society. That may be acceptable to you, you may be able to function as a Christian as a dhimmi and not lose your witness for Christ. Or you may say no, I'll fight. If you say that, understand what you are saying, you are saying you will fight to the death. That too is probably a valid Christian response because here you're looking more at a war and there is such a thing as just war. But that's not really what I'm talking about in this passage because ISIS is not a national government but a rogue group and so the differences merit a different response. We need to be clear that there are differences and there is not just one answer to all threats.

What I'm saying is that when the government you live under says that Christianity is illegal, you have to go on preaching Christ and accept condemnation with whatever undesirable consequences that entails. Peter and Paul were martyred. John was imprisoned, the Christians at Smyrna were faithful until death!

Now whenever Christianity has been criminalized there's always an interesting by-product. We see this repeated through history. Charles Clough pointed out in a recent newsletter that at the time of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 there were only about 300 Christians. He refers to these as Muslim background believers. In other words, under that more secular regime there were hardly any Christians in Iran. Then Khomeini came to power and he enforced Shariah Law and guess what happened to the number of Christians. It skyrocketed, grew to over 400,000 and those who left Iran and are now Christian's number over 1,000,000. About AD200 a man named Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." What Tertullian was getting at is that every time the Church is persecuted it grows. That's what happened in Iran. So there's a growth principle when Christianity is persecuted. Another way of looking at this is to say that the more Satan persecutes the Church the more the tables are turned and people defect from Satan into the arms of Jesus. And all of this gets back to Scripture because it's a fascinating outworking of what Jesus said in Matt 16:18, "I will build My Church and the gates of hades will not prevail over the Church." Go think about that because Christianity is being persecuted more in America than it ever has and it's only going to increase. I think it goes without saying that Islam is not the fastest growing religion in the world right now, Christianity is. You don't hear that much but it's true.

Think about the persecution Christians are facing in this country. What you have seen on the news is Christian business people are getting taken to court because they run their businesses on certain principles of conscience.

Hobby Lobby, Memories Pizza in Indiana and many others. We need to be standing ready to help these people. There are organizations that are set up to help them when they come under government condemnation and many Americans are helping them. When the Memories Pizza guy was fined by this administration he raised over \$600,000 in 48 hours through an organization called GoFundMe. This kind of response shows that there are millions of Americans who see the anti-Christian turnings of this government and are willing to stand up and help these persecuted Christians. We need to be standing ready to help them. We're going to see more of this. And, of course, we need to be prepared to be thrown in the slammer. We need to be prepared to become martyrs for Christ. I don't know exactly what's going to happen. I know that America has to go down because the Bible predicts that the power will move to the Middle East and right now the power is in the West. I don't know how America goes down though. It may be by a foreign power like Iran attacking us, it may be a domestic issue like a war of aggression waged by our government against its citizens. If that happens, and I think that it's a possibility because things never got resolved in what many call the Civil War of 1861-1865. But friend there was very little that was civil about that war. That was a War of Northern Aggression against the South. The South said we joined the union voluntarily and we can unjoin just as voluntarily. And the north said, no you can't. That shows that the issue was states' rights and the southern states said we want out. The northern states said we won't let you out. Friend, that is Fascism; that is the Fascist mentality. The fascist mentality says the whole must be bound together, even if it takes a strong arm. And I do not think that slavery had anything to do with it. I think that slavery is a smokescreen. Slavery would have worked itself out just like it did in Britain. Anyway, that war never really resolved the fundamental differences, there are still two basic types of people in this country, those who want the Constitution, limited government, and States Rights and those who want a new constitution, unlimited government and programs. The only difference is the line isn't the Mason-Dixon line, it isn't North and South, it's the Urban-Rural line, city folk vs small town folk, that is basically where the division falls. But if there is some kind of war in this country I see no possibility for those of us who are standing for the Constitution unless we have a well-regulated militia as the 2nd Amendment says is necessary, or our State secedes and forms its own nation and military. And in that case we are part of a different nation and under those conditions we may have to fight in a war. That would be a horrible thing. I'm not trying to initiate anything. I'm not going to initiate a revolution. That's not in the Bible. The only revolution in the Bible is the Exodus and it was initiated by God and He did all the fighting. The Israelites did nothing but walk out. So I don't see a biblical right for revolution and I know that is a controversial issue because of the American Revolution. But I don't see a justification, at least, for initiating a revolution. Now if our state secedes and forms another nation that is another issue because I can be in a war against a nation that attacks my nation. And if you think I'm wrong maybe you can tell me more about this. I admit I'm not an expert on these issues. I'm not a politician. I'm basically a grammarian and a historian who knows some science. And what I know from the Bible is there are Christians who are martyred and several in the NT and that it was because Christianity was made illegal in Rome and they said, well, we can't live in a closet, we have to live our faith out in the public square. Today our government is saying, it's fine to have your religious beliefs as long as you keep it private. But whether we have a 1st amendment or not Christ says we have to speak

our faith out in public. This book is not a private religious matter. Jesus wasn't crucified in a closet. He was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, public setting. God isn't interested in putting Himself on display in a cave. He puts Himself on display in public and that is what I intend to do. Otherwise people can't come to Christ. And when that is outlawed I'll deal with the consequences. Someone said to me last week, "Well, I'll be right there in jail beside you," this was a visitor, and I say, "Praise God! Christians behind bars for doing nothing other than preaching the gospel peaceably is one of the ways the church explodes in growth. The only alternative is to leave and go elsewhere and there were some apostles that did leave Rome. Thomas, for example, went to India. So that is an option too. You can leave the country but keep on preaching the gospel. People need to know. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.

But now we come back to Romans 13:3 and what Paul is speaking of here is the norm. Normally we are looking to submit to the governing authorities. We aren't looking to commit civil disobedience. We are praying for them and looking to obey. That is what we want to be able to do, we want to be able to do that at every point so we can have peace in our day and live with a good conscience and all of that. So let's look at verse 3. **For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil.** That is why I keep saying this is the norm. Normally **rulers** only condemn **evil behavior**. But I have shown you that there have been rulers who legislated evil behavior. Take, for example, the Pharaoh in Exodus 1 who said to the Hebrew midwives, "When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death..." That was a government commanding murder. Well, the midwives saw through that one. The text says, "But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live." It's not normal for a government to command evil, but it does happen. And if the United States government commanded the armed forces to murder United States citizens and I was in the military I would say, "Sorry, no can do, I am here to uphold the constitution, not your phony order." But normally the government doesn't command evil. Paul is looking at what is normal and not exceptional cases. Normally the governing rulers command good and look favorably on those who do good. Paul says the ruling authorities should only be **a cause of fear...for** those who do **evil**. That's why God instituted human government, to cause fear to come to those who do evil, to curb evil. So if you do evil, breaking a law, you have something to fear, right? Good. I hope so.

Now you notice in verse 3 that Paul starts using the pronoun **you**, speaking to Christians only, whereas before in vv 1-2 he was speaking to all people and used the pronoun **they**. So now he is speaking directly to Christians and only to Christians. He says to us, **Do you want to have no fear of authority?** I do. I used to be afraid of policemen because I sped and I did other illegal things. I built up a whole way of looking at the police that was based on fear. Why? Were they evil? No, I was evil.¹ I was breaking the law. I had a lot to fear. I have since learned to keep the law. I have disposed of that fear. When I see a policeman I am not afraid at all. I am joyful. I see him with a gun on his hip and that makes me happy because I am doing good. What do I have to fear? But that man is a fear to those who do evil and I am glad about that. That man makes me feel safe and secure and I am glad he

is there. And when he is not there I am exercising my 2nd amendment rights to protect myself and those I love and innocent bystanders from evil people. Why do I do that? Because I am not optimistic about the heart of man. I think that Jeremiah summed it up pretty well, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it?" (Jer 17:9) That's true. That is the word of God. That is coming from the God who penetrates all of our thoughts, knows every hair on our head. He knows what is in man. What did Jesus indicate about the heart of man in John 2? "And He was not entrusting Himself to them because He knew what was in them." What was in them? A sinful nature, a natural tendency to evil. That is what the all-seeing God has told us and that is what I have seen in myself and if you are honest that is what you have seen in yourself. In the Nuremberg trials after WWII when the captured Nazi's were being put on the stand and one Jewish man came to testify and he saw this Nazi and he started to weep. When asked later why he wept he responded that in anticipation of the trial he pictured this Nazi as an animal but when he saw him he realized he was a man just like him. It was the painful realization that he could have been that man that carried out such atrocities. That is a realization we all have to come to; that there is nothing good in us to commend us to God. We all crave, we all lust, we all manipulate, curse others, hate, deceive and many other horrible things. That is why we need the gospel and that is why we are thankful that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Not that we saved ourselves but that God saved us from our wretched pitiful state and raised us up into a new outlook on life, a new way to live, a life of faithfully trusting God's promises, a way that we do not live all the time but when we do there is righteousness, peace, love, contentment and many other wonderful things that come into the world that we cannot take credit for but credit them to the work of God's Spirit in our life. Anyway, that is why I exercise my 2nd Amendment rights. I think there are dangerous people out there. I think Jesus also said in Luke 22:36, "...whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one." I don't think Jesus said buy a sword in order to wear it on your side and look cool. The roads of Rome were full of dangerous criminals and it was meant for protection, to take life if necessary, to protect life. A sword is always viewed as an instrument to take life, the life of someone endangering life. And what did His disciples say? "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough." Of course, those are verses that no one wants to talk about because they prefer to think of Jesus as an emasculated, long-haired hippie. That is not the Jesus of the Bible. The Jesus of the Bible said buy a sword because people are evil and you need personal protection. But back to the main point of verse 3; governing authorities are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. That is why God gave human government, to curb evil. And if you want to have no fear of those human authorities like policemen then Paul says, **Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;** The word **praise** means "admiration" even "approval" or "recognition." Law abiding citizens are often admired by governing authorities. Douglas Moo says that "Paul may be thinking specifically of the practice of Roman authorities of publishing on inscriptions the names of "benefactors" of society."² They would set these up in public places as spectacles for everyone to see. Why did they do that? To encourage people to do good. The long of the short of it is that law-abiding Christians make the law enforcement's job easy. They are people they

don't have to worry about. They actually aid the governing authorities in keeping the peace by transmitting the principles of doing good to others in society.

In 13:4 Paul says about the governing authorities that **it is a minister of God to you for good**. The word **minister** was often used of believers who are in roles of service, the deacon or *διακονος*, but it was also used of those who hold civic office and serve in that capacity. Therefore, a governing official is a minister of God whether he is a believer or not. This is confirmed by the fact that the LXX version of the OT uses this word of pagan rulers like Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. Now we would be careful to say that they are servants **of God** in so far as they administer things which are **good**, that is, things that are in accordance with the divine standards of justice revealed in Scripture. So the governing ruler who is administering true justice on our behalf is **a minister of God**. This was probably something the believers at Rome needed to hear. Perhaps they wanted to rebel against unbelieving rulers thinking that they should only submit to authorities within the church. This is not so. The church is within a society, it is not a kingdom, it is a gathering of people within a kingdom and the governing rulers of that kingdom are God's agents to administer His justice. Therefore Christians should live in willful subjection to them.

Then in verse 4 he returns to reasons one should fear a ruler. **But if you do what is evil**, third class condition, maybe **you do what is evil**, maybe you do not, but **if you do...be afraid**. Paul is commanding us to be afraid if we do evil. Why does Paul want us to be afraid? There are two reasons. The first reason in verse 4 is because the governing authorities **do not bear the sword for nothing**. In other words, the policeman doesn't wear a gun on his hip to look cool. It is there to show the power to take life. They didn't have guns back in the time of Christ but they did have the sword. That was parallel to a gun today. How do we know the purpose of the sword? We go back in Scripture. The sword is first mentioned in Gen 3 when Adam and Eve had sinned and were booted out of the Garden of Eden. Cherubim with flaming swords were placed at the entrance to that garden to prohibit any human from entering. What were those flaming swords for? One thing: execution of any human who tried to go into the garden and eat of the tree of life. Why? All the text says is that if we ate of the tree of life we would live forever. The problem with living so long is that we have a sin nature and the longer we live in these bodies with a sinful nature the greater capacity we have for evil. Think of the fact that the people before the flood lived up to 900 years or so. What do you think that world was like? Can you imagine how much evil someone who lived 900 years could come up with? Someone who had centuries of trial and error and thinking? We don't have to guess because God says in Gen 6:5 that "every intent of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually." That was the worst world ever. That is why God had to destroy that world with the Flood. Even men in our world today have not even dreamed of the evil that the men before the Flood executed. That is because they lived so long they had many more centuries to think about it. But they would still die, the limit was almost 1,000 years. But if they tried to enter the Garden and live longer they would be struck down by the sword of the cherubim. After the Flood, God reduced man's years to ~70 in order to slow down the progression of evil. It is good that our lives are not longer; good for ourselves and good for others. It is also good that there are those who **bear the**

sword. God took the sword from the cherubim and gave it to men after the Flood. He said, "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man." That means that the most basic right of human authorities is the right to execute by capital punishment.

In 13:4 Paul is probably not referring directly to the right to capital punishment but simply to the right to exact punishment for a crime which precedes from that basis. He says, **it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.** That is, they have the right to exact punishment for any crime. The government, as Paul says, by way of the sword, is **an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.** This is good and He is a minister of God when He is administering this wrath. This is the purpose of human government, to punish evil by bringing wrath on the evil doer. Evil should be punished. It is necessary to a stable, thriving educational system, a stable, thriving economy and overall a stable, thriving nation. But if you do good you have nothing to fear. So the first reason Paul says we should be afraid if we do evil is because the government will exact punishment on us.

13:5, **Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection,** this is answering to verse 1; verse 1 used the same word translated **subjection.** It's *υποτασσω* and means to "line up in rank under." There is a rank to society and the governing authorities have rank over us. **Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath** administered by the government **but also for conscience sake.** This is the second reason if we do evil we should be afraid. If we do something evil and we are afraid what does that mean? It means our conscience is still working, it has not been seared. The conscience can be seared as with an iron. It can become dull and lose sensitivity. What happens if we break laws often is that we sear our conscience and then we are no longer afraid to do evil. That is a very bad place to be. That will result in bold crimes. The teaching of the word of God can re-sensitize it. We need to develop a sensitive conscience through training in the word so our conscience is attuned to the true standard which is His word. A sensitive conscience is a healthy conscience. When we do evil and fear it is a good sign that we have a healthy conscience. And there's more to the conscience, all of chapter 14 is about the conscience and we will talk more about it then.

For now, in summary what can we say? In 13:3 we have a general statement; governing rulers are not a cause for those who practice good behavior, but for those who practice evil. He then turns specifically to Christians and asks, Do you want to have no fear of authority? Fine, that is easy, do what is good and you will have praise from them. They may even give you a write up in the paper. The government knows that commending those who live lawful lives is part of the impetus for encouraging others to live lawful lives. In 13:4 Paul notes that the governing authorities are a minister of God, they serve Him whether they realize it or not because they are dispensing divine justice as long as the standards they employ are His standards. So then Christians should submit to them, it is for our good. But, if you do what is evil, it is important to be afraid. Why? For two reasons, first, because they do not bear the sword for nothing. They bear it in order to serve as ministers of God who punish by bringing wrath on the one who practices evil. And second, in 13:5 for the sake of the conscience which is a very precious

thing and should not be defiled and if already defiled it should be re-sensitized through training in the word of God.

¹ I am not giving all policemen a free pass here. Of course, there are corrupt policemen.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).