

Christianity and Civil Government
Romans 13:1-10 (NCV)
August 20, 2017

All of you must yield to the government rulers. No one rules unless God has given him the power to rule, and no one rules now without that power from God. So those who are against the government are really against what God has commanded. And they will bring punishment on themselves. Those who do right do not have to fear the rulers; only those who do wrong fear them. Do you want to be unafraid of the rulers? Then do what is right, and they will praise you. The ruler is God's servant to help you. But if you do wrong, then be afraid. He has the power to punish; he is God's servant to punish those who do wrong. So you must yield to the government, not only because you might be punished, but because you know it is right. This is also why you pay taxes. Rulers are working for God and give their time to their work. Pay everyone, then, what you owe. If you owe any kind of tax, pay it. Show respect and honor to them all. Do not owe people anything, except always owe love to each other, because the person who loves others has obeyed all the law. The law says, "You must not be guilty of adultery. You must not murder anyone. You must not steal. You must not want to take your neighbor's things." All these commands and all others are really only one rule: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Love never hurts a neighbor, so loving is obeying all the law.

There is an old rule that says, "Never discuss religion or politics." Today, we are going to discuss both, because the two cannot be separated. The first amendment to our constitution was never intended to be a wall between religion and government. That amendment simply says that the government cannot establish a national religion and the government may not interfere in the free exercise of religion. There are radicals on both sides of this issue who claim the two have nothing to do with each other, but that simply isn't biblical.

First, let's look at the authority of the civil government. Verse one of the reading leaves no doubt that the Christian is to be subject to the rule of the government he or she lives under. You might wish things were different, but the words *all of you must yield* (Ro 13:1 NCV) are an absolute imperative and leave no room for exceptions. Everyone is subject to the government of the land.

The text goes on to say that *those who are against the government are really against what God has commanded* (Ro 13:2 NCV). These words need some explanation. There are, and have always been, evil governments in the world. God does not establish these governments, but he may allow them to exist for his purposes. To be against the government doesn't mean we disagree with the government, it means we are not to join in armed revolt against the government. When an evil government has run its course according to God's will, God will remove it.

It's important to remember, when Paul wrote these words he had already suffered quite a lot at the hands of the Roman government. Yet, through all his suffering, Paul never encouraged rebellion because Paul knew that God's plan was at work whether he understood it or not.

The text calls civil government *God's servant*. The operative word here is servant. There are no perfect governments – never has been and never will be until Jesus returns. All forms of human government, by their very nature, are corrupt. As long as a government is made up of sinful people, government will never be perfect.

However, that doesn't mean God can't operate through these imperfect governments to bring about his will. The Babylonians and the Assyrians were heathen governments that God used to discipline the Israelites and to bring his people back to him. God used the government of the heathen Egyptian Pharaoh to protect the children of Jacob while they grew into the powerful nation of Israel. Whether the governments of the world admit it or not, God is in complete control.

Now, let's shift to everyone's favorite subject – taxes. All governments have some form of taxes. That's because no government has money of its own. The only money a government has is what it takes from the people. The government doesn't spend its money, it spends your money.

No one likes to pay taxes. So, if God has established civil government, how does God feel about paying taxes? I have known people who refuse to pay taxes because they claimed the government has no right to demand taxes. These folks not only went to jail, lost everything they had and a good deal of all their future paychecks, they were biblically wrong.

Our text tells us we should pay whatever taxes the government demands. However, the text was written by Paul. Did Jesus say anything about paying taxes? In the 22nd chapter of Matthew, we find some people asking Jesus if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus told them, “*Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and give to God the things that are God's.*” (Mt 22:21 NCV).

Taxes are one of the vehicles the government uses to accomplish the things God wants the government to do. If Jesus told the people to pay the taxes the Roman government demanded, then not paying taxes would be a form of rebellion. Verse two forbids rebelling against the government. God's people are supposed to be model good citizens.

In his first letter, Peter wrote this: *For the Lord's sake, yield to the people who have authority in this world: the king, who is the highest authority, and the leaders who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. It is God's desire that by doing good you should stop foolish people from saying stupid things about you. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. Live as servants of God. Show respect for all people: Love the brothers and sisters of God's family, respect God, honor the king* (1 Pe 2:13-17 NCV).

Being a model citizen means obeying the laws of the land. This takes the Christian from the black and white into shades of gray. Laws are made by the imperfect people who make up imperfect governments. Therefore, the Christian has to examine the laws of

the land and test them against God's Word.

Many laws are good laws. We have laws that protect us from those who would unlawfully take our property. We have laws that punish those who do harm to other people. We have laws that help maintain order and decency in society. We enjoy a great deal of freedom in America, but there is no freedom without laws. There are volumes of laws that have been written to reward those who obey and punish those who disobey.

There are also laws that are not good. These are the imperfect laws made by those imperfect people who populate imperfect governments. What is the Christian to do when faced with a law which violates God's will?

This brings us to the area of civil disobedience. Our text tells us to obey the laws of the land because God has ordained civil government. But what recourse do Christians have when civil government oversteps its divinely established authority and makes laws that violate God's Word?

In the 5th chapter of the Book of Acts, we find an account of the apostles being ordered not to preach about Jesus. *The soldiers brought the apostles to the meeting and made them stand before the leaders. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in that name. But look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are trying to make us responsible for this man's death." Peter and the other apostles answered, "We must obey God, not human authority!"* (Ac 5:27-29 NCV).

The Jewish midwives in Egypt chose to face punishment from Pharaoh rather than kill the newborn Israelite baby boys. Daniel chose to face hungry lions rather than commit idolatry. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose to face a fiery furnace rather than worship a golden statue.

When faced with a law that disagrees with God's Word, we have not only the divine right but also the divine responsibility not to obey that law. The Christian response to such a law is passive resistance. We simply don't comply. Having said that, understand that there will probably be consequences. But we must always obey God over obeying men.

The easiest case in point would be abortion. The Bible is firmly against abortion just as it opposes all forms of murder. That means Christians must be firmly opposed to abortion. However, that does not give Christians the right to destroy abortion clinics. That does not give Christians the right to murder abortion doctors.

In America we have options which many other people don't have. We have the right to peaceful assembly. We can make our feelings known. We have the right to free speech. We have a form of government that gives us the power of the vote. We can take legal steps to bring an end to unjust laws.

Let me take our recourse against laws that violate God's law one step farther. As Christians, we don't just have the right to assemble and speak out and vote, these things are our duty. If we are to obey God and love our neighbors as ourselves, we must take every legal action available to us to undo sinful laws.

God, in his infinite wisdom, established civil governments in order to fulfill his purposes. We are obligated to obey these God-ordained authorities. We are morally bound to be good citizens so we might maintain a good testimony for the name of Christ.

Even though God created civil governments, he did not give up his sovereign power over all things. God has not allowed civil governments to replace his right to govern. Times may come when we have to disobey our government in order to obey God. In those times we may have to suffer for what is right; as Paul suffered, as Peter suffered, as prophets and God-fearing people throughout time suffered, as Jesus suffered.

Our hope in good times and in bad is this: Jesus is coming back. When he returns, there will be perfect government in his kingdom which will have no end.