

## ROMANS 13

### The Christian's Responsibility to Government

These days we're hearing a lot about the relationships between government and religion. This last week the Supreme Court heard arguments regarding whether or not it is unconstitutional for the Ten commandments to be displayed in various court houses around the country. This raises a lot of feelings and questions for Christians who wonder to what degree we are to be involved in the government of our country. Paul has some words for us on this matter in Romans chapter 13. Let's begin our study of Romans 13 by reading the first 7 verses which will give us a flavor of what this chapter is all about. Romans 13:1-7:

*1 **OBEY THE GOVERNMENT**, for God is the one who put it there. All governments have been placed in power by God.*

*2 So those who refuse to obey the laws of the land are refusing to obey God, and punishment will follow.*

*3 For the authorities do not frighten people who are doing right, but they frighten those who do wrong. So do what they say, and you will get along well.*

*4 The authorities are sent by God to help you. But if you are doing something wrong, of course you should be afraid, for you will be punished. **The authorities are established by God for that very purpose, to punish those who do wrong.***

*5 So you must **obey the government** for two reasons: to keep from being punished and to keep a clear conscience.*

*6 **PAY YOUR TAXES**, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid so they can keep on doing the work God intended them to do.*

*7 Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and import duties, and give respect and honor to all to whom it is due.*

The whole world lives under one type of government or another. Paul has outlined for us in these first seven verses **the Christian's responsibility to government**. This is an important topic for Christians because over the centuries they've found themselves living under conditions representative of every kind of government and every kind of ruler.

However, under our present judicial system political power rather than God becomes the judge of the law of our country, and that kind of system is exactly what the founding fathers referred to as **tyranny**. What has happened to the United States is the last thing the founding fathers wanted. The First Amendment which was established for the purpose of protecting free expression and the free exercise of religion has been contaminated and twisted by the courts to the point where it is now a criminal offense to

utter a prayer or post the Ten Commandments in a public school. **We have allowed a power hungry government to take away our constitutional freedoms and most of us don't even realize it.**

The founding fathers didn't intend for you to pay the amount of taxes you're required to pay today. **The federal government was originally intended to establish foreign policy and provide for the protection of the citizens. Everything else was to be left to private enterprise.** What at another time would be considered intolerable can quickly become the standard by which a nation is governed. The progressive income tax which is now taken for granted would have been considered a flagrant violation of "*equal protection under the laws*" in 1787. As Americans continually allow the government to make decisions for them, they will continue to lose their moral direction which will result in total confusion over what constitutes right and wrong.

Today, in the United States of America we're living in a POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE and our government no longer considers the Bible to be the standard for truth and behavior. Does that give Christians the right to defy the laws of the nation that we know contradict what the Bible teaches? Should churches become politically active in order to effect changes in the way the nation is governed? These are very sticky questions and Christians are very much divided as to how these questions should be answered. They're not easy questions with an absolutely right answer under all circumstances. I don't know of anywhere in Scripture that suggests Christians are to be active in civil change. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't participate as citizens but it's a question of priorities. Our first priority is to take the message of the Gospel to those who are unsaved. **We must remember that a person's eternity is forever and the time they're living within a government run state is limited only to their lifetime. Their salvation is far more important than their politics.** Christians are a kingdom of priests, not a kingdom of politicians.

Yet, individual Christians are not necessarily to abandon taking part in government. In choosing a career, God may lead some to seek careers in government service. Those with skills as secretaries, accountants, etc., may well find jobs for their skills in the government. Others with gifts and skills of leadership and administration may become mayors, senators, representatives, governors, or even president. But their challenge in these roles is **to live as dedicated Christians, not as power hungry politicians.**

If all the citizens in our country lived as fully devoted followers of Christ, some of our current political battles and challenges could be eliminated. An added bonus would be to eliminate all the spin doctors in the news media along with all the yelling, screaming, and name calling that's developed over the past ten to fifteen years. Fifty years ago we had many fine statesmen serving in the Senate and House of Representatives. They'd debate government policy during the day and then go out and enjoy dinner together in the evening. They saw their responsibility to be that of doing what is best for the country. Today democrats and republicans are locked in personal name calling and just this past week Senator Robert Byrd sank to an all time low by referring to the Republicans as Nazis.

We should also recognize the reality that if people are changed on the inside as followers of Jesus Christ, they will naturally conduct themselves in a manner that will provide for the good of the nation. Such people would elect representatives who share the same beliefs, and the nation as a whole would be blessed because as a whole they are living within the will of God and according to His design. We are to be the conscience of the nation by godly living and faithful preaching. This is the way we confront government. We preach against sin and the evil of our times.

Listen to what God says in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

*14 Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.*

We can look to Christ once again for the perfect example of how we should conduct ourselves. He came into a pretty interesting world. He came upon the scene when the Roman Empire was at the height of its power. Under the Roman government slavery flourished. There were approximately 3 slaves for every free man. Christ came into a world of absolutism ( a political theory that absolute power should be vested in one or more rulers). Rulers were absolute monarchs. They had control of every function of government. It was absolutely one-man rule. And those who governed the provinces as the emperor's governors had in their regions the same kind of absolute authority in their own little world. No one held them accountable.

The world Jesus entered was one in which taxes were extraordinarily high. Those who worked as tax collectors sold themselves to the Roman government and had the authority to increase the government's required tax by whatever amount they could collect for their own profit. In other words if you made the equivalent of \$100 per week and the Roman government demanded a tax of \$50 per week, the tax collector could add another \$25 to your tax bill for himself. There were all kinds of injustices.

Jesus' people, the Jews, were an oppressed minority under Roman rule. And what did Jesus tell them? ***“Give to Caesar what belongs to him. But everything that belongs to God must be given to God”*** (Luke 20:25). Jesus did not come with force to overthrow the Roman rule. He didn't seek social change or attempt to eliminate slavery. He didn't come with a political or economic agenda. Those things were not his concern. He didn't come to bring democracy. His appeal was to the hearts of the people. He didn't emphasize their political freedoms or their rights. He didn't participate in a civil rights movement or press for the removal of injustice. **HE CAME TO PREACH A GOSPEL OF SALVATION.** A Gospel promising that when a person's heart is right with God, it doesn't much matter what the government is like. Jesus was not interested in a new political order but in a new spiritual order. He expected His Church to carry on the same kind of ministry. He knew if they did that they would soon begin to draw people within the government to the Christian faith. In that way the government itself would change for the better. A government would

develop which was just and which would honor God.

What are we called to do in this society in which we're living? What rights does the government have over us and what is to be our proper response to those rights? The truth be told, Christians needn't make political, economic, and social issues their primary concern. **The primary concern on our minds should be the souls of lost men and women.** Is that what concerns your mind? I'm not as concerned that everyone be happy and healthy and wealthy as I am that they be saved. We need not be as concerned about the external life of people as we are their internal soul.

What God has called us to do is right here in this passage in Romans 13. The first thing is in verse 1: "*Obey the government.*" The second thing is in verse 6: "*Pay your taxes.*" That's all there is to it. Obey the government and pay your taxes. That's what Jesus meant when he said: "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's.*" What did Caesar want? Obedience and money. That's still our basic duty to the government. Beyond that we need to focus our attention on the yet unsaved. And we're not going to be effective in doing that if all we do is just meet with a bunch of other church members an hour or two on Sunday morning and then go home to attend to the secular necessities of our lives. Our focus should be on the unsaved when we're on the job, on the train, at the PTA, at the ballgame, or at the grocery store. There are opportunities everywhere you go to spread the message of the Gospel.

Let's pause here to consider some things for a minute. There are different kinds of governments. In the Old Testament the children of Israel were originally to operate under what is called a **theocracy**. That is, God was the head of the government. In our modern world the various kinds of governments include: monarchy, dictatorship, and democracy. I'm not aware of any current theocracies in operation in the world, at least among the major governments.

Now it is important, when interpreting this passage, to keep in mind the differences between the Roman government of Paul's day and the American government under which we live. Paul stressed those two duties because that was all that was expected of citizens under Caesar: **to obey and pay taxes**. We live under a democracy. If Paul were writing directly to us today, he might include some other things: obey the laws, pay your taxes, vote, and communicate with your lawmakers to let them know what you believe is right and wrong. Our constitutional and representational form of government provides for these actions. Indeed a democracy cannot continue without them. So in our culture, "*obey the government*" includes voting and letting your voice be heard. Non-Christian and anti-Christian laws are coming about today in the United States because the unsaved are letting their voices be heard while Christians have been silent.

We have another responsibility to the government, which is extremely important. **1**

**Timothy 2:12:**

*"Pray . . . for kings and all who are in authority."*

If I were to ask how many of you obey laws and pay taxes, probably 99%-100% of you

would raise your hand. If I were to ask how many of you vote regularly, probably 50-60% of you would raise your hand. If I ask how many write your legislators, maybe there would be 1-2% who would respond. I wonder what percentage of us pray daily for our President and others in government?

How does chapter 13 fit in with the first eleven chapters of Romans that we studied? Let's look at that. The first 11 chapters of Romans tell us how to be justified (saved) through faith. Paul describes what it means to be a Christian. Then in chapter 12 we're told what to do with this gift of salvation. Our response in verse 1 of chapter 12 is to **give our body as a living sacrifice to God**. We are to give Him all that we are. Here we see the concept of self-sacrifice. **We are to give ourselves completely to God.**

The result of doing that will be a proper relationship with God. You will know and prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:2). So if you respond to the salvation God has given you by giving Him everything, you are going to have a right relationship with Him. You're going to know His will and His purpose and you're going to do it. In verses 3-13, Paul says that by doing this you'll also have a proper relationship with the family of God, other believers. From verse 14-21, Paul says that if you give your life to God, you'll also have right relationships with your non-Christian friends as well as your enemies. And it simply follows as we get into chapter 13 that if you have a life dedicated to Jesus Christ you will not only have a right relationship with God, other Christians, outsiders, and enemies, but **you'll have a right relationship with the governmental authorities as well.**

In Romans 12:14-21 Paul told us that we are not to retaliate when an injustice is done to us. We are to return love for hate and good for evil. So no matter what the government does, we're obedient and we pay our taxes. We're not violent, we're not terrorists or subversives. What did Paul say in Romans 12:18? *"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* Do not break the peace with anyone including the government. Do not take vengeance against the government either. God takes care of that according to Romans 12:19. However, if someone cheats you, does you harm, or injures you in any way, you do have recourse to go to the government and ask for whatever help they can provide according to the laws that apply to such things. You have a right to attempt to get just compensation for your loss, but you don't have the right to turn around and sue the other party for far more than your actual loss in a vengeful law suit.

Vengeance is not the role of the individual in chapter 13, it is the role of the government. The government is given the responsibility for making things right. In the Old Testament the principle of an *"eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life"* is a principle of government and not personal vengeance. It is the role of civil government to deal with crime, not the individual.

In Paul's day the Jews were incredibly zealous for their own identity, their own nation, their own freedom, and their own God. So the Jews constantly rebelled against Roman control. They didn't want to be under the control of anyone. In spite of that kind of behavior, however, the Jews received exceptional privileges from the Romans. In fact the

Roman Empire that demanded the worship of Caesar as a god, allowed the Jews to worship their own God. They were very tolerant of the faith of the Jews in spite of their attitude.

Among the Jews was a group called the **Zealots**. They defied the Roman government in every way. They wouldn't be obedient and they wouldn't pay taxes. They were murderers and assassins, and I might go so far as to say the terrorists of Israel. As a matter of fact when they saw the power that Jesus had, they immediately wanted to make Him king because they thought He would lead them in overthrowing Roman rule. This attitude eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews from Israel in 70 A.D. The Romans killed over a million Jews in that holocaust. They decided to put a stop once and for all to the constant revolts of the Jewish people. Such behavior on the part of the Zealots did not demonstrate a godly attitude and it's what Jesus meant when He said: "*Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,*" and that's what Paul meant when he said: "*Be at peace with all men.*" People of God are not to be concerned with the issues of government as our priority. **We're to be busy living godly lives as the conscience of a nation and preaching God's Word.**

Now when Jesus came along and began teaching the Gospel, the Romans saw Christianity as just an offshoot of Judaism, so Jesus and the apostles were allowed the same freedom as the Jews were allowed. But at the same time they saw Christianity as a religion in which Jesus had been proclaimed a king and a rival to Caesar, so they kept a close eye on the Christians. In spite of this, however, there was a real tolerance for Christianity.

The best thing for the Christians to do was to live peaceably and honorably as citizens within their society. They were not to be associated with the Jewish attitude of rebellion. So Paul writes to the Roman Christians in Romans chapter 13 to remind of them of their duties as citizens. He wanted them to separate Christianity from the behavior of Judaism. Paul wanted them to affirm that Christians are good citizens, and good citizenship includes honoring and respecting those in authority.

A Christian has a duty to his/her nation even if their ruler is a Stalin or a Hitler. Peter shares the same attitude as Paul when he's writing to a group of Christians who are right on the verge of a major persecution. He's encouraging them to be ready to face what they're about to face. 1 Peter 4:12-15:

*12 Dear friends, **don't be surprised at the fiery trials** you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you.*

*13 Instead, be very glad—because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering, and afterward you will have the wonderful joy of sharing his glory when it is displayed to all the world.*

*14 Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God will come upon you.*

*15 If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making*

*trouble, or prying into other people's affairs.*

Peter is saying to get ready because they're going to suffer. Peter is writing to Christians who are living in a time of persecution. He's telling them they need to be prepared to handle that persecution. How? 1 Peter 2:12:

*12 Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world.*

How are you going to live in a society that always accuses you of doing what is wrong, and how are they going to then recognize what you do to be honorable? 1 Peter 2:13-15:

*13 For the Lord's sake, **accept all authority—the king as head of state, 14 and the officials he has appointed.** For the king has sent them to punish all who do wrong and to honor those who do right.  
15 **It is God's will that your good lives should silence those who make foolish accusations against you.***

Foolish people are always looking for something to criticize and your lack of good citizenship and obedience to the government will give them a valid reason to criticize you. Then verse 16 tells us:

*16 You are not slaves; you are free. But your freedom is not an excuse to do evil. **YOU ARE FREE TO LIVE AS GOD'S SLAVES.***

We're not free to be evil. We are not free to disobey the laws of the land. We are to honor all people, love one another, fear God, and honor both God and Christ. 1 Peter 2:17-21:

*17 **Show respect for everyone.** Love your Christian brothers and sisters. Fear God. Show respect for the king.  
18 You who are slaves must accept the authority of your masters. Do whatever they tell you—not only if they are kind and reasonable, but **even if they are harsh.**  
19 For **God is pleased** with you **when**, for the sake of your conscience, **you patiently endure unfair treatment.**  
20 Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing right and are **patient** beneath the blows, God is pleased with you.*

So Peter is telling this persecuted group of people to accept the persecution, to accept the suffering, and obey the authorities. You are to be obedient to all the laws in your nation, even if you're living under communism or some other form of dictatorial rule. The only exception to this is where you're told you can't worship or obey the Scripture. If you are

persecuted or killed it should be because of your faith in Jesus Christ, not because you disobeyed the law. Christians in any society who are willing to obey the laws and submit to those laws, will find it to their benefit.

Paul has been telling us in our study of Romans that we have a responsibility to live out our justification by grace through our faith. **Sacrificing ourselves to the service of God as we're told in Romans 12:1,2 should make us model citizens of our nation.** We shouldn't be known as protestors or people who criticize those in authority. We should speak out against sin, injustice, evil and immorality, but still honor those who are in authority over us. This applies to every nation, not just America. As you know America didn't even exist when this was written.

Let's now take a look at the first principle that Paul gives us in Romans 13:1: "*Obey the government.*" This is an unconditional statement. It applies to everyone everywhere. The NASB translation says: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.*" You'll note **there is no distinction here between good governments and bad governments, fair laws and unfair laws.** The obedience of Christians to unjust rulers of the Roman Empire, the obedience of Christians through persecution, brought about tolerance, acceptance, and eventually Christianity itself to that same Empire. I like what Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:1-4:

*1 I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. As you make your requests, plead for God's mercy upon them, and give thanks.*

*2 Pray this way for kings and all others who are in authority, so that we can live in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity.*

*3 This is good and pleases God our Savior,*

*4 for he wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.*

God wants us to live a peaceful life. We are to make peace and not trouble. We are to live quiet, peaceful lives in all godliness and honesty. **We affect the society from the inside by changing hearts not the government;** although if all people came to believe in Christ because of the behavior of Christians, the whole country would certainly be changed for the better because everyone would be living according to the will of God. In his letter to Titus, Paul writes, Titus 3:1,2:

*1 Remind your people to submit to the government and its officers. They should be obedient, always ready to do what is good.*

*2 They must not speak evil of anyone, and they must avoid quarreling. Instead, they should be gentle and show true humility to everyone.*

**There is only one limitation** to our submission to the governing rulers, and to better understand that let's go to Acts 4:13-17, where we find that Peter and John have just been put in prison by the Jewish leaders for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

*13 The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness*



*of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.*

*14 But since the man who had been healed was standing right there among them, the council had nothing to say.*

*15 So they sent Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves.*

*16 “What should we do with these men?” they asked each other. “We can’t deny they have done a miraculous sign, and **everybody in Jerusalem knows about it.***

*17 But perhaps we can stop them from spreading their propoganda. We’ll warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus’ name again.”*

So the Jewish leaders decided that they’ll just tell Peter and John that they can’t say these kind of things anymore. They commanded them to no longer speak or teach in the name of Jesus, Acts 4:18,19:

*18 So they called the apostles back in and told them never again to speak or teach about Jesus.*

*19 But Peter and John replied, “Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him?”*

Now things are getting a little tense aren’t they? Jesus Christ had instructed Peter and John to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Now the authorities tell them they are not to preach. In Acts 4:20, Peter and John answer:

*20 We cannot stop telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard.*

The one time we have the right to disobey the authority of the government is when the government tells us not to do something God commanded us to do, or when the government commands us to do something God commanded us not to do.

For example, if all these rights that are being developed for homosexuals come to where they make demands on Christians to accept the lifestyles of homosexuals, that is where we draw the line. We can show love and compassion to the homosexual and offer to help in their recovery, but we cannot accept or embrace their lifestyle. We cannot accept abortion, euthanasia, pornography, or sex outside of marriage. Those are things for which God has given us specific instructions. And it is at those times that we speak clearly about why we’re taking such a stand. What did Peter and John do? Acts 4:21ff.

*21 The council then threatened them further, but they finally let them go because they didn’t know how to punish them without starting a riot.*

*23 As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers*

*and told them what the leading priests and elders had said.*

*24 Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer:*

*They prayed:*

*“For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed.*

*28 In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan.*

*29 And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching.*

*30 Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

*31 After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Pentecost)<sup>1</sup>. And **THEY PREACHED GOD’S MESSAGE WITH BOLDNESS.***

We get further confirmation of this in Acts 5 when the apostles are again arrested and jailed, Acts 5:27-32:

*27 Then they brought the apostles in before the council.*

*28 “Didn’t we tell you never again to teach in this man’s name?” the high priest demanded. “Instead, you have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching about Jesus, and you intend to blame us for his death!”*

*29 But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than human authority.*

*30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by crucifying him.*

*31 Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as Prince and Savior. He did this to give the people of Israel an opportunity to turn from their sins and turn to God so their sins would be forgiven.*

*32 We are witnesses of these things and so is the **Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him.**”*

We have been privileged in this country to live under the best government that has ever probably existed in all of history. God has blessed this country for over 200 years, and do you want to know one of the reasons? The United States has been the primary source of missionaries for the world. Now a change is occurring. There are other countries that are taking the lead in sending out missionaries.

If our time is up as a nation and one day our government changes in a major way, we are still to be models of obedience and honor those who are in authority so that the name of Christ may not be associated with any form of evil whatsoever. But if we want to hold on to the blessings of living “*in the land of the free and the home of the brave,*” remember how God has told us we can insure that, 2 Chronicles 7:14:

<sup>1</sup> Parentheses added.

*14 Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.*

That simply means that if all people who believe in Christ as Savior will humble themselves before God in obedience and pray and seek His guidance and turn from evil, then God will forgive us and make our nation great.

Next time we'll examine the seven reasons that Paul gives as to why we should submit and be obedient to authority.