

## **The Christian Citizen**

### **Romans 13:1-7**

©Copyright September 15, 2024 by Rev. Bruce Goettsche

We are about seven weeks out from a significant election in our country. One of the most significant things is how widely the candidates and their followers differ. Not only that, you will be told (by whomever you are talking to) that the country may not survive the election of the opposition candidate. No matter what the result of the election, there is a good chance there will be some upheaval and hand wringing. . . and it could be extensive.

Churches in our country are not supposed to recommend or endorse particular candidates. Frankly, that may be for the best since the church is made up of a variety of political persuasions. To start endorsing candidate will in effect push some people away because their politics might not coincide with the rest of the church. It would be nice if there could be civil conversation about such things, but it is unlikely right now.

The question we want to raise this morning is: What is the Christian approach to government and citizenship? Like every other issue Paul has spoken about in chapter 12 and 13, Paul advances an alternative to the partisanship of our day.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

### **The Clear Command**

The command seems pretty clear: we are to respect and serve our governing authorities. We are to honor and obey them. Paul says the reason we are to respect and submit to their authority is because God has organized things this way. Paul says authorities exist because of God.

Right away people begin to bristle. They point out that there are many terrible leaders out there. Not only that, but there are also leaders who seemed to be Satanic (Think Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and many more.) For now, let me point out something important. We are told that God established the authorities. I believe that means he established the principle of governmental authority.

This does not mean He established every leader or necessarily every position of authority. Likewise it doesn't mean that God established every law enacted by a particular government. We will look at this issue a little more closely later in the message. Let's continue with the text.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

## The Benefit of Earthly Rulers

Paul says there are some practical reasons to submit to earthly authorities. First, they keep order. Laws are necessary in a sin-filled world. Even a bad ruler can make people a little more civil with their laws. We, as a society, need to hold some common values. Our rulers help us be more civil.

We need laws (think fences) that restrain sin. The human heart is corrupt. The evil that people come up with now is mind-numbing. Without laws the depravity would spread without any restraint. One commentator wrote,

The Lord established government for the purpose of keeping order in society and reigning in the sinful nature of man. If we did not have the government there would be no public utilities, no military, no police force, and no public aid. Without the government we would have no assurance that our food sources were safe and there would be no court system (even if we are disappointed with the way the courts are going it is still better than anarchy). Without the government defending the powerless and protecting the little guy, the powerful would victimize the weak. God ordained government for the public good and to restrain the sinful nature of men. We ought to respect those in authority because God designed those authorities to help us. (Moo, Douglas)

Second, the government has the power of coercion (or enforcement). This sounds like a bad thing, but it is not. If someone is going to establish laws, they must also have the power to enforce those laws. This is what it means to say, "he does not bear the sword in vain". The government must have the power for enforcement, or they have no authority.

For example, if you post speed limit laws but have no real power to enforce those laws, people aren't going to slow down. If you don't have the authority to punish criminals, you can't reign in crime. Criminals will become emboldened in their criminality. This is why there are debates about jail time, bail, and mandatory sentencing.

Paul says the best way to avoid the consequences of jail and the fines is to not engage in criminal activity! Obey the Law.

## How Far Do we Go with This?

Let's get back to the earlier question: Does this passage mean we are to just go along with whatever the Government proposes out of respect for the authorities?

In Paul's day, the King was Nero. Nero was a crazy tyrant. Even so, Paul says that we ought to obey, serve, and pray for even this leader. I don't think Paul is arguing that God appoints every leader in office or that He is pleased with every leader. In other words, I don't think God selected people like Saddam Hussein to be King. What he is saying is that we should respect the principle of authority even when it is being administered poorly. God can still work through the godless leaders. (Moo *ibid*)

Since we are told every authority is from the Lord, we can expand this to other areas of our life. The principle is we should live under and obey the authorities in our lives. What if the one in authority goes too far? What if they use their God given authority to rebel against God? For example,

- What if the government passed a law that said we could no longer worship?
- What if we are told we must not talk about our faith?
- What if we were told we had to turn in every copy of the Bible?
- What if the organization we belong to uses our funds to support immoral causes or engage in other illegal activities?
- What if an employer asks you to do something illegal or unethical?
- What if a military officer asks you to do something barbaric or inhuman?
- What if your employer asks you to promote material that is obscene, slanderous or demeaning to someone else?
- What if a doctor asks you to assist with a procedure you believe is immoral?
- What if a coach, teacher, or religious leader asks you to participate in actions that are inappropriate and illegal?
- What if the government is using our taxes to support things we believe to be immoral

This is a slippery slope. Our human tendency will be to consider anything we don't like to be grounds for our rebellion. That is to completely invalidate what the Bible teaches.

What about Moses, Daniel, Peter and John? They all resisted authority and engaged in what we call "civil disobedience." Daniel and his friends refused to bow to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar or stop praying to God as the law demanded. They ended up in the fiery furnace. Moses refused to back off from Pharaoh. The Maccabees refused to let the Seleucid leader Antiochus Epiphanes IV desecrate the Temple of God.

In the account in the book of Acts the disciples deliberately ignore the clear instructions from the leadership. They said, you are forbidden to preach in the temple. The next day they went back and preached in the temple. When they were questioned, they responded, "We must obey God rather than men."

The only time we can ignore the governing authorities is when we must submit to a higher authority! The theologian Bonhoeffer felt the command to do justice and show mercy took precedence over the command to obey the governing authority (Hitler). It would seem (in my mind) that an attempt on Hitler's life was taking things too far. David refused to take any action against King Saul, who was chasing him, even though he did nothing wrong. David believed it was wrong to take the life of the Lord's anointed. That is something to think about. I think it should be argued that prayer is a much more powerful weapon than adopting the tactics of the world.

There is something we must keep in mind in such cases: there may be legal ramifications in those times when we choose to obey God rather than men. If we are going to go against the government we must be prepared to pay the consequences.

### **What About Capital Punishment?**

One of the more controversial of these powers given to the government regards capital punishment. The sword of government is wielded with executions. The Bible declares that a person who kills another person intentionally should have their life taken from them. This could not be done unless there were two eyewitnesses to testify to what happened. And, if the witness is found to be lying . . . they are to be killed.

One of those verses is in the book of Genesis 9:5-6. God is speaking at the time of Noah.

<sup>5</sup>“And I will require the blood of anyone who takes another person's life. If a wild animal kills a person, it must die. And anyone who murders a fellow human must die. <sup>6</sup>If anyone takes a human life, that person's life will also be taken by human hands. For God made human beings in his own image.

The Lord is arguing that to take another's life is to usurp God's authority. We are made in God's image (and for God's purpose). To take someone's life is an attack on God's authority! God commands that a person who takes another life should have their life forfeited. Only God can make that judgment.

But the Bible is aware of the importance of being sure someone is guilty before they are executed. In Deuteronomy 17:6-7 says,

But never put a person to death on the testimony of only one witness. There must always be two or three witnesses. <sup>7</sup>The witnesses must throw the first stones, and then all the people may join in. In this way, you will purge the evil from among you.

Deuteronomy 19:16-19 says

“If a malicious witness comes forward and accuses someone of a crime, <sup>17</sup> then both the accuser and accused must appear before the Lord by coming to the priests and judges in office at that time. <sup>18</sup> The judges must investigate the case thoroughly. If the accuser has brought false charges against his fellow Israelite, <sup>19</sup> you must impose on the accuser the

sentence he intended for the other person. In this way, you will purge such evil from among you.

The point of these commands is to keep the order of society. God is saying the best deterrent to murder is to kill (justly) the one who is doing the murder.) It sounds like doubletalk: “It is wrong to kill someone, so kill anyone that kills another.” The significant factor here is that it is not man pronouncing the sentence, but God is. This is designed to “rein in evil” in the society.

Notice the point of all of this was to “purge the evil from among you.” We would say today that capital punishment is viewed as a deterrent. It is saying, “If people know there are severe consequences to their actions, this will keep many from engaging in those actions.” The debate rages today whether or not capital punishment serves as a deterrent.

There are also some complications to what seems so straightforward in the Old Testament in terms of capital punishment leaving many Christians on opposite sides of the argument.

1. The Bible commands the death penalty for lots of things. (striking a parent, cursing a parent, violating the Sabbath, worshipping other gods and more). We see these other things as largely an overreaction today so why would we kill anyone?
2. DNA evidence has shown that some convictions were erroneous, so innocent people are sometimes condemned to death. Witnesses are sometimes wrong in their identification. We don’t want to execute innocent people.
3. The New Testament and Jesus seem to change the paradigm. Christians are told to love their enemies and to do good to those who spitefully use us. The model is one of mercy.
4. Some will argue that if we take the lives of others, we are making it impossible for them to be saved. (the counter to this is that such people are often already so hardened to God’s call that they will not respond with repentance).

I’m not arguing for either side in this debate. I want you to see the two sides of the debate and understand that good Biblical Christians can stand on both sides of the debate.

## **What Does Good Citizenship Look Like?**

The last part of our text gives us a picture of what good citizenship should look like.

<sup>6</sup> Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. <sup>7</sup> Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.

In a world that is very divided politically, people feel strongly about their beliefs, what does it mean to be a Christians citizen?

The first thing mentioned by Paul is the need to pay our taxes. We all feel taxes are too high. We also feel the government is using some of those tax dollars immorally. Yet, we continue to demand that the government provide a military, police protection, fire protection, good roads,

aid for those in need, disaster relief, a solid public education system, power and lights and the list goes on. If we want the benefits of the government, we have an obligation to pay our “fair share.” Is there a lot of waste in government spending? Of course. That is a problem that is hard to overcome. If we are going to keep looking to the government for “free money” the either the national debt will be unsustainable, or taxes will rise so that we can no longer afford to live.

Second, we should speak respectfully about leaders even when we don’t like them. We should talk about the President and our Representative or Senator using their formal titles just as we would a Physician or Dentist. We can and should show respect to all in positions of authority.

Third, we need to participate. We should be registered to vote and then vote. I know it doesn’t feel like we have a lot of say in this area of Illinois . . . especially in Presidential Politics, but for democracy to work we should all vote. And not only that, we should try to be informed voters. We should be people who do more than vote for one party because that is the party we have always voted for. Parties change their values. We need to vote for people and issues, not parties.

Fourth, we should encourage civil political discourse. The best thing we can do is be thinking citizens. For this to happen we will have to listen to and try to understand the views of those who disagree with us. Hopefully, that will lead the other person to return the favor. We may not change anyone, but we will have listened and tried to understand. In so doing we will have shown respect and honor to someone and that is always a good idea. We must respect the rights of others and rally to those who are being oppressed.

Fifth, we have to remember that the Kingdom we ultimately belong to is not the kingdom of this world. We belong first to the Kingdom of God! We are NOT Americans first! We are Christians first! Or, at least we should be. Our national identity must not drive us. Our biblical identity must be the driving force for our lives. God is not confined to any nation or political party in any nation. As a result, we should be less dogmatic about a party and more dogmatic about how to serve the Lord in our citizenship. The notion that our future depends on a certain candidate getting into office is blasphemous! Our future depends upon the Lord! If our citizenship overshadows our discipleship, we have lost our way.

Finally, we must pray for our leaders. We all have opinions on politics. We see some of the flaws in the way things are done. But the question we must ask ourselves is “What are we doing about it?” Are we seeking the Lord for the United States of America. Are we asking Him to lead our leaders, to keep them safe, to give them wisdom, and to give them a heart for the things of God?

Our real power is not in the ballot box. It is in the prayers of God’s people. To be the best of citizens we need to intercede for our nation and all the nations of the world. And we need to intercede for those who have authority over us in work, school, health and life. Prayer is a powerful weapon . . . but only if you use it.