

*We have in this text a Christian theology of the state and of obedience to the state, an obedience that Christians have offered through the centuries even to governments hostile to their faith. In this obedience too the Lord may be loved and served.*

**“The Christian a Citizen”**

**Romans 13:1-7**

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Before we read our text this morning it will be helpful to remember the situation Christians faced in the Greco-Roman world of the day. For some time after Pentecost the imperial authorities generally did not distinguish between Christians and Jews and, because Jews had long been treated as a special exception and were usually tolerated in the practice of their specific beliefs, Christians were tolerated as well. The Jewish faith was registered – such a step as is now required in many countries of the world – as a *religio licita*, a permitted or tolerated religion, and its practices allowed, even though those practices were different and in some ways offensive to deeply held Roman sensibilities. Roman governors in Judea, for example, were told to respect Jewish scruples regarding the Sabbath, clean and unclean foods, and idolatry, even though, as we know in the case of Pontius Pilate, the governors did not always comply. There were exceptions, of course, but for several decades after Pentecost there was no systematic persecution of Christians by the Roman state. If you remember from Acts, when Paul was in Corinth, Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia, when asked by the Corinthian Jews to act against the Corinthian Christians, regarded the whole dust-up as a theological dispute between Jews of different stripes and took no action. For some time, then, Paul’s was a relatively happy experience of Roman government and he benefited from the protection it extended him, all the more as he was himself a Roman citizen

That more positive situation was soon to change and the situation for both Jews and Christians became increasingly acute. Paul himself would run afoul of local authorities, spend several years in prison, and, eventually, be put to death by the Roman government. Peter would suffer a similar fate. When Paul wrote Romans the situation was not as severe as it would become, but, even then, no one thought of the Roman government as a friend of the Christian faith. Remember, it had put the Savior himself to death, however much at the instigation of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The rebellion in Judea in the 60s would harden Roman attitudes toward Judaism and that served to deepen their animosity toward Christians as well. By the end of the first century the adversarial relationship of the Roman state to the Christian faith was a fact of life and would continue to be so, in varying degrees, for another two hundred years and more. Christianity was widely regarded by the Romans as a subversive superstition that caused trouble wherever it was found. Many commentators through the ages have wondered how this paragraph might have been written differently had it been written a few years later with Paul in prison in Rome awaiting his execution! It would probably differ little, in fact, as we shall see. But, no matter: this is what Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

It is important for us to recognize that the issues raised by this paragraph have been largely theoretical to American believers through the years. It is not so in other parts of the world and it has not been so through the ages. This has been a passage of scripture of *tremendous* importance

and obedience to it has cost *vast* numbers of Christians their lives through the course of history. It is been one of the most demanding and radical pieces of Christian ethics to be found anywhere in the Word of God and we American Christians may find ourselves pouring over this short passage more and more as the years pass. Remember as we read it that what Paul says here with the authority of Jesus Christ means the same thing for a Christian in Iran or China or Saudi Arabia as it does for us.

### Text Comment

- v.1 One fundamental perspective of this passage, and one found throughout Holy Scripture, is that, however concerned the Bible may be regarding the *rights* of other men, it is chiefly concerned with the *duties* of Christians. [Moule, 214] And, as also typical of the Bible, those duties are founded on theological realities: the reason Christians must obey the state is because it has been instituted by God and its authority derives from the Christians' own Heavenly Father.
  
- v.4 Paul's employment of the term "sword" here is, as you may know, of great significance in the longstanding debate over the propriety of capital punishment. Most have concluded, and I would have thought inevitably, that sanction is here given to capital punishment, though, of course, only when employed according to the laws of the God who invested the state with such powers in the first place.
  
- v.6 It should be no surprise that taxes should enter the discussion regarding obedience to the state because from the very beginning taxes have been a chief means of the state's imposition of its power upon his citizens and a chief complaint of those citizens against their government. The war that created the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was, after all, a war ostensibly about taxes. But the same argument wages today. As one wag put it: if our forefathers thought taxation *without* representation was bad, they ought to see what it's like *with* representation!"
  
- v.7 There may be even here an echo of the Lord's remark about rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. We know that Paul was thoroughly familiar with the substance of the Gospel accounts even if they had not yet been written when Paul wrote Romans.

One proof of the immense importance of Paul's letter to the Romans in the history of Christian thought, and so one proof of the extraordinary genius of Paul and of the place he occupies in the foundation of Christian thinking about almost everything important, is that there are so many passages in Romans that are the locus classicus of some important biblical idea or teaching. A locus classicus is a passage in the Bible that is the primary basis for a doctrine or a biblical teaching. For example, the exposition of natural revelation in Romans 1 – how truth about God is communicated in and through the natural world – is the most important statement on that theme in the Bible. It is not the only statement by any means, but it is far and away the most influential and systematic statement and sooner or later what any biblically minded Christian thinks about general revelation is determined by how he or she understands Paul's exposition of it in Romans 1. We could say the same thing about the role of the law in exposing sin in Romans 2 and 3,

about justification by faith in Romans 3 through 5, about the relationship between forgiveness of sin and the renewal of life in Romans 6, about the continuing sinfulness of a Christian man or woman in Romans 7, about election to eternal life in Romans 9, about the place of Israel in God's plan of salvation in Romans 11 and so on. No wonder this letter, of all biblical books, has been so instrumental in shaping the church's mind; text after text in this book is the *key* text on some biblical theme.

Well we have another such locus classicus before us this morning. It is, again not the only statement on the theme of the Christian and the state in the Bible – there are, in fact, many others – but it is the most important one and the one in which the theme is laid out most systematically and most definitively. Whenever the subject of obedience to the government is discussed among Christians someone quickly brings up Romans 13. Christian theologians and politicians of all stripes have had to reckon with Paul's teaching here as they have attempted to define from this text the relationship between the Christian and the civil government and, particularly, as they have attempted to explain the obligations of a Christian to a hostile anti-Christian government. Samuel Rutherford, for example, in his classic 17<sup>th</sup> century work of political philosophy, *Lex Rex* ["The law is the King"] – the book for which he was to be arrested and no doubt would have been executed had he not died of natural causes before the king's men could seize him – I say Rutherford spent a great deal of effort attempting to explain why Romans 13 does not prohibit Christians from rising in violent resistance to a tyrant. Most of our scholars don't think Rutherford was too successful in his argument or that his interpretation of Romans 13 was very faithful to Paul's argument, but take my point: he knew because everyone knows that Christians can't be sure they are thinking rightly about their relationship to the state and their obligation toward the state unless they can reconcile their thinking with what Paul taught in Romans 13:1-7.

The admonition of Paul that Christians are to be subject to the governing authorities is a particularly poignant and difficult one. For most of her history Israel was subject to powers, governments, and empires, far greater than herself. In the era immediately before the NT her greatest feat as a people was accomplished under the Maccabees who led a resistance movement, a guerilla struggle, against their Greek overlords. How does that square with Romans 13? At the time of the writing of the NT the Jews were a subject people whose freedom to practice their faith depended absolutely on the good will of the imperial power. And from then on it would be very regularly the case that the Christian church would have to make its way in the world quietly, careful not to offend unnecessarily the powers that be. By the end of the first century and thereafter the number of Christians executed by the state *for no other reason but that they were followers of Jesus Christ* grew with grotesque rapidity.

Even later, when, in Europe at any rate, the government was ostensibly Christian, it was often overtly hostile to what we would understand to be evangelical or biblical Christianity. We sometimes forget that many of our most famous martyrs in the Protestant tradition – from Wyclif, Savonarola, and Hus long before the Reformation to the Scottish covenanters long after the reformation – were put to death by so-called *Christian* governments. It is a sad and gruesome history, the history of the state in Christendom. I came across the other day the statement of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglican bishop who suggested that the study of the history of 16<sup>th</sup> century England should be banned – all the terrible cruelty of Christians toward Christians, the malfeasance of successive ostensibly Christian governments, the egregious hypocrisy of so much that was said

and done in the name of Jesus Christ during that particular century, the dismal failure of Christian politics to reflect in any way, shape or form the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ – he said the study of that century should be banned since one could not delve into it without imperiling his soul! [Mandell Creighton in Paul Johnson, *Heroes*, 88]

But all through this history of suffering and woe, God’s people, to a phenomenal degree and most beautifully, heeded the counsel of this great and important text. From the earliest days, heeding another injunction of the Apostle Paul, Christians prayed for their rulers, even when they were suffering terribly at their hands. They refused to lift arms against them and, though often mistreated above any other group of citizens, they remained obedient and dutiful citizens. To be sure, they refused to do wrong when it was demanded of them, they refused to worship Caesar as a god for example, but their refusal was made all the more powerful a statement because they had shown themselves so ready to be obedient and loyal citizens in every way that they could. The one thing the Roman government could count on was that Christians would pay their taxes and keep the laws. As Augustine would later explain in his *City of God*, “the patience and faith of the saints” wore down the fury of the church’s persecutors.

Were they right? Was the Christian determination to obey whenever possible and to suffer rather than to resist or to take up arms, was it a faithful understanding of Paul in Romans 13? Would Paul have written something else had he written Romans from his prison cell shortly before he was executed for his faith? What precisely is our duty when the government is hostile to our faith as Christians? These are the questions that have been asked from virtually the first time Christians read Paul’s letter to the Romans. They are being asked urgently all around the world today where Christians face hostile governments. And, without a doubt these same questions are being asked with new urgency by Christians in the Western world today. We no longer look at our government as benign, the way we did a generation ago. We now wonder whether our children and grandchildren will face a state overtly hostile to their Christian convictions and Christian way of life. Will our children be taken from us, as children have been taken from Christians before by rogue states, hostile governments, determined to ensure that our children are not raised with our principles?

What does Romans 13 require of us if we are to be faithful to the Lord and his Word? I think we can fashion an acceptable answer to that question with three propositions.

- I. *The first is that the text, as so many biblical texts, must be interpreted according to the principle of ceteris paribus.*

The Latin phrase *ceteris paribus* means “other things being equal.” That is, something is true if all other relevant factors or circumstances remain the same. As our own Dr. Buswell reminds us:

“We must remember here the principle that we do not have the teaching of the Scripture on any subject unless we have examined all the relevant passages. Not all the qualifications of a complex subject are to be found in any one passage. The principle that one must obey the existing government, and that it is God’s will that government shall exist, and that a lawless person is resisting what God has ordained, is perfectly obvious *ceteris paribus.*” [*Systematic Theology*, i, 401]

A different way of making the same point is to observe that we have here in Romans 13:1-7 what scholars call an instance of *merismus*. Merismus is a Latin term that comes from the Greek word *meros* meaning “part.” That is, in Romans 13 we have *part* of the Bible’s teaching regarding the Christian and government, but there are parts of that teaching that are not here.

Take, for example, the famous exchange between the apostles and the Sanhedrin in Acts 5. The Jewish government ordered the apostles to stop preaching their message of Christ’s resurrection and of salvation through faith in him. That was a direct command of the constituted government but the apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men.” In Paul’s case later and in Peter’s, as in the case of many other less well known believers, such as Stephen and Antipas mentioned in Revelation 2, these men went to their deaths in largest part because they refused an order of the government. So it is clearly not the teaching of the NT that Christians are to obey any and every order of their government.

As Jesus said, they were to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s. Their ultimate loyalty and their ultimate obedience, obviously, belonged to God not to the state. Romans 13:1-7 does not answer every question and we must look elsewhere to construct a complete biblical doctrine of the state and of a Christian’s obligation to the state. Paul obviously does not mean that Christians are to do anything and everything the state may require. We must obey God rather than men.

*II. The second proposition necessary to a proper understanding of this text is this: the state is given by God a prerogative that is forbidden the ordinary citizen and, explicitly, the ordinary Christian, by the same God.*

There is great importance to be attached to the juxtaposition of this paragraph with the one that immediately precedes it at the end of chapter 12. We sometimes get mesmerized by the chapter numbers and forget that these are texts succeeding one another in a continuous narrative. There at the end of chapter 12 we were taught that Christians are not to avenge themselves, they are *never* to avenge themselves, but leave room for God’s wrath. He will repay and vengeance is his.

In the early days of missionary work in China small Christian communities were springing up everywhere and it was regularly the case that they fell afoul of local governments. Some of the Christian men in one particular community were very cruelly treated by a petty government official—beaten and robbed. But believing it to be their calling, having read Romans 12 and 13, they did not resist. Some time later this minor official ran into trouble with his superiors about something else and was himself convicted and threatened with severe punishment. But one of the Christian men who had been the target of this man’s mistreatment and of his unjust treatment of Christians in the town not only had declined to serve at trial as a witness against him, because of the commandment of Romans 12, but interposed and secured the man’s pardon and release. The official became as a result a fast friend of the Christians and their new community. The injustices stopped and the church flourished. That sort of thing has happened times without number in Christian history. Christians not taking vengeance and by their patience and love pouring burning coals on the head of their enemies. [Moule, 214]

Clearly those men did what they ought to have done. They did precisely what they were commanded to do at the end of Romans 12. They did not take vengeance, they left that to God as Paul and Jesus and other biblical writers say we must. Instead they blessed their enemy and they treated kindly those who had mistreated them. But, in 13:4 we read of the state as “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on wrongdoers.” The word for avenger in 13:4 is a form of the same words for “avenge” and “vengeance” in 12:19. The state is to do what private individuals and Christians in particular are *never* to do. The state has a different function in the economy of God; it has different callings and authority.

In other words, the state is charged with a function that has been explicitly forbidden to Christians, as we read at the end of the previous chapter in v. 19. So, like it or not, this text is unmistakably clear that whether or not the state exacts punishment from wrongdoers as it should, whether or not it punishes the innocent as it should not, the state has a role the Christian does not. In its most important function, that of judgment and punishment, the state cannot be replaced by the individual, even the individual Christian, or by the church. We are not the instruments of punitive judgment in the world; God has not given us that role. This fact has far too often been forgotten or ignored by Christians.

We are appalled today at jihadist plans to murder political figures and civilians indiscriminately. But as we condemn that injustice let us do so quietly and humbly remembering that Pope Gregory XIII ordered that the massacre of thousands of Protestants in France on St. Bartholomew’s day 1572 be celebrated in the streets of Rome just as the Arabs rejoiced on 9/11 and, in 1580, promised merit to anyone who would assassinate Queen Elizabeth I. At the same time French Catholics openly offered to pay handsomely for Elizabeth’s murder. And Scottish covenanters, Presbyterians all, sometimes murdered their political enemies justifying their action as the quest for justice. And Scottish people wisely, largely, recoiled from what they did because of Romans 13. No Christian can square the church’s pursuit or a Christian’s pursuit of justice by violence with Paul’s straightforward instructions in this text. The state may do what the Christian and the church may not.

*III. The third proposition necessary to a right understanding of Romans 13 is that fundamental to a Christian’s loyalty to God is his submission to the state at every point possible.*

If there are limits to a Christian’s obedience to the state, and obviously there are – “We must obey God rather than men” – those limits are very clearly defined in the Bible. Paul’s point here is the main point: Christians are to obey the state. That is the primary thing. That is the first part of Christian understanding of civil government: it comes from God and is, therefore, to be obeyed.

And lest that point be missed it is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament and even later in New Testament history when the specter of imperial persecution was rising unmistakably over the church. In Peter’s first letter, written, perhaps 6 to 8 years after Romans, we read this:

“Be subject *for the Lord’s sake* to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil...”

Paul knew what he was saying when he wrote the first seven verses of Romans 13. He knew the imperial government was no friend of the Christian faith. He knew it threatened the life and freedom of the followers of Christ to practice their faith. But he still commanded us to obey and taught us that in obeying the state we were, in fact, honoring the Lord.

Militia groups, such as the one recently arrested, have no biblical justification for their commitment to violent resistance and nor even do Christians who protest some program or another of the government by refusing to pay their taxes. It is very interesting to me that Paul refers specifically to taxes here. That is so often the rub for us isn't it? We don't like the government to take our money. And, to be sure, governments are notorious for wasting money or using it either unwisely or unjustly.

We have had PCA ministers argue that they should not pay into the social security system – a right, interestingly, they have been given but only if they can assert the denial as essential to their religious convictions, which I must say I do not believe they can, – because they find the program somehow immoral. But whether Social Security is a good program or bad; whether it is going to secure us in our retirement or bankrupt our nation, whether it is immoral or not *is completely and absolutely irrelevant.*

Consider taxation in the first century and consider that Jesus himself, the King of Kings, paid his taxes as demanded by the Roman government. Talk about taxation without representation. Taxes collected in Judea and Galilee from Jews were used to pay for the army that occupied Palestine, oppressed the Jews, and made their national humiliation public every day. Those same taxes went to fund the construction and support of temples to Roman gods such as the immense temple to Diana (Artemis) in Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. There was very little that a Jew's taxes or a Christian's taxes in that first century were spent on that a Jew or a Christian would approve! And yet they paid their taxes as the Lord Jesus and as here the Apostle Paul told them to do. The fact that there are some things governments order Christians to do that they cannot do does not mean that almost all the time Christians are to do what they are told and to do that as an act of loyalty to the Lord their God.

Let's sum up: 1) Paul does not mean that Christians are to do what the government commands if it commands that which God forbids; 2) but clearly the government has a role that the individual does not have and Christians are obliged to respect that role and honor that government as instituted of God; and 3) obedience is required even of those governments that are overtly hostile to the Christian faith and way of life unless and until it orders the violation of God's law. Even then Christians are not to resist violently but to suffer as an act of reverence for God and his law and to leave the outcome to God.

Take heed. Get this clear in your minds. You may feel this is not particularly relevant to your daily life. Who is to say what will be relevant weeks, months or years from now? This is our watchword and it will be, I fear, more and more as it has been in ages past. It is by obedience to these instructions of Paul that faithful Christians have lived from the beginning and it is by this same obedience that they have remained and prospered in a hostile world in which governments, however owing their origin to the Almighty enthusiastically did and do the will of the Devil. It is

today in many places in this world as it was in days gone by, Christians proving themselves the most loyal of citizens even as their governments mistreat and kill them. As Augustine reminds us, the church won the Roman world not by fighting but by suffering and in their suffering proving that there was a higher law and a greater loyalty and a much more wonderful love than anything known in the Roman world.