

C.H. Spurgeon on Romans 13 - Commentary

What is a believer's relationship to government? How should a believer relate to the laws of the land? At the beginning of chapter 12, Paul called upon believers to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds. In the remainder of the chapter, Paul provided several important examples of what a renewed mind would look and act like. Some could have responded to the apostle Paul's appeal to not be conformed to this world, by refusing to submit to any earthly authority. Paul immediately corrects this possible misapplication of his teaching at the beginning of chapter 13. As believers we are not to be conformed to the mindset of this world, yet there remains in this world vestiges of God's rule through the institutions that He has ordained. Two very important institutions that have been ordained by God are marriage and civil government. Marriage was ordained by God before the Fall as a means to populate the earth. Government was ordained by God after the Fall and Flood to restrain sin by the punishment of evil. Therefore government has an important function in the world today, even for believers.

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul lays out a case for submission to government:

(1) Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. (2) Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. (3) For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: (4) For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. (5) Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. (6) For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. (7) Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

I. Government is Ordained By God, vv. 1-2. Paul calls for submission to authority three times in this passage (verses 1, 5 and 7). In the first of these, Paul states the command in a very straightforward manner: "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers." This is then followed up with the key rationale for this imperative: "For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." This is our Father's World! As Daniel said while in captivity in Babylon as recorded in Daniel 2:20-21, Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his: And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: God is Sovereign! This belief is the foundation for what Paul is saying in these verses. If God is completely in control of all things, then obviously whoever is setting on the throne is there because God put them there. The implication of this declaration is spelled out in verse 2. To resist the authority of government is to resist the authority of God and will result in judgment (both now from the civil authorities and in the future from God). There are some who say that the only reason Paul writes in such a positive way about government is because he has not yet been unjustly persecuted by government. According to this view, Paul was naively optimistic about the role of government. However, Paul bases his argument not upon his own experience but upon some fundamental theological beliefs. These beliefs include the idea that God ordained government and a recognition of God's absolute sovereignty. If these two premises are each true, then Paul's conclusion is valid. That conclusion is that rebellion against government is rebellion against God. Paul, of course, would agree with the other apostles who in the book of Acts declared that it is better

to obey God than man (Acts 5:29). When the choice is between obeying God or man, choose to obey God. However, most of what government requires us to do does not violate the law of God. Therefore, we have a responsibility in most cases to obey God by obeying man!

II. Government is Ordained by God to Protect the Innocent by Punishing the Guilty, vv. 3-5. Why did God ordain government? The reason is spelled out by Paul in verses 3-5.

Government's God ordained role is to protect the innocent. This is accomplished by the punishment of the guilty! As verse three states, those who are innocent have nothing to fear from government (this is generally true, though not in every case). The ruler is God's servant to protect the innocent (see verse 4). In order to fulfill this responsibility, God has granted to Civil Government the power to enforce the law (the sword). After the Flood, God issued the first ordinance of civil government. It was the institution of capital punishment. In Genesis 9:6, God told Noah and his family, Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man. The civil ruler is God's servant to execute judgment upon those who violate the law. He is called here an "avenger" or "revenger". This statement comes only from Paul's command to believers to not avenge themselves (12:17-21). Here, however, Paul is not addressing the individual believers response to wrongs done to him personally, but the government's responsibility to crimes against the innocent. This raises the question: What about the Christian ruler, policeman or soldier? What is their responsibility? Well, their responsibility as individuals is to not avenge themselves, but their responsibility as government officials requires them to fulfill their God-ordained duties to protect the innocent by punishing the guilty. I think the implication of this passage is that Christians need not be pacifists. We should all be pacifists in regard to personal wrongs done to us. But if we are placed by God in a position of authority, we must use that authority as God intended for it to be used. In other words, when personally wronged believers have the responsibility to turn the other cheek. But government does not have that same responsibility. In fact, government has the opposite responsibility of punishing wrong-doing. Recently, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we were given the opportunity to see a little of what society could be were it not for the restraining arm of the law. The rioting and looting in the streets of New Orleans became shocking evidence of what this world would be like without God-ordained government. In other words, we need government in this sin cursed world until the day when "the kingdoms of this world is become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ."

III. Therefore, Government Should Be Supported Financially, Feared Respectfully and Honoured Reverently, vv. 6-7. Paul's conclusion is found in verses 6 and 7. His conclusion is that since government is ordained by God to protect the innocent by punishing the guilty, this is the reason we pay taxes. None of us can afford individually to support an army, man a police force or fill our courtrooms with judges. Therefore, we each pay local, state and federal taxes so that government can provide those services. Not only do we have a responsibility to pay for the support of our government officials, we also have a responsibility to pray for the salvation of our government officials. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; (2) For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. In Romans 13:7, Paul lists four duties that we have to government officials: Tribute (direct taxes like income taxes), Custom (indirect taxes like sales taxes), Fear (because of the sword), and Honour. According to the IRS Oversight Board's Special Report for the fiscal year of 2005, 19 % (nearly 1/5) of all Americans admit that they approve of cheating on their income tax. That doesn't include the probably larger

percentage who don't approve, but do it anyway! Paul, however, says that we have a responsibility to pay taxes. This is also the teaching of Jesus Himself in Mark 12:13-17:

(12) And they sought to lay hold on him, but feared the people: for they knew that he had spoken the parable against them: and they left him, and went their way. (13) And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words. (14) And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? (15) Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? bring me a penny, that I may see it. (16) And they brought it. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's. (17) And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

Conclusion: An anonymous Christian from the 2nd century AD wrote the following description of Christians as a defense to a tutor of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius named Diognetus. This excerpt from that letter sums up the proper attitude of Christians in this world in relationship to government. For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. From the Epistle to Diognetus, chapter 5 This should be our testimony as Christians in the world, even by those who hate us!