

Sermons through

Romans

God's Ministers

Romans 13:1-7

Part Three

Authority

With Study Questions

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Authority

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵ Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷ Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-7).

Introduction

Approximately one-hundred and fifty years ago the theologian and principal of Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles Hodge wrote:

Experience teaches that where human life is undervalued, it is insecure; that where the murderer escapes with impunity or is inadequately punished, homicides are fearfully multiplied. The practical question, therefore, is, who is to die? the innocent man or the murderer?¹

What Hodge is essentially stating is that a breakdown of the enforcement of sound laws results in increased crime. With that comes a temptation to take the law into your own hands. If I have no faith that criminals will be dealt with by the state, I am more inclined to sit on my

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprinted 1989), p. 364.

porch with a shotgun.

Two hundred years before Hodge, the divines of the Westminster Confession of Faith addressed the Christian's biblical responsibilities vis-à-vis the civil magistrate, writing:

It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, (1 Tim. 2:1-2) to honour their persons, (1 Pet. 2:17) to pay them tribute or other dues, (Rom. 13:6-7) to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience' sake. (Rom. 13:5, Tit. 3:1) Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: (1 Pet. 2:13-14, 16) from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted, (Rom. 13:1, 1 Kings 2:35, Acts 25:9-11, 2 Pet. 2:1, 10-11, Jude 8-11).²

Review

We began our shorts series on the passage speaking on *Political Tranquility*. Political discussions can be the source of great anguish and divisiveness. I've read of more than one person unfriending others and some have narrowly escaped horrifying episodes at holiday meals...so far. Some have had melt-downs because things didn't go the way people thought or hoped. Others may be setting themselves up for a fall by feeling things are finally going their way.

Contentment-true contentment-is not found watching election results. It's been commonly and accurately stated that *good* can be the greatest enemy of *best*. True, deep, unwavering tranquility comes through yielding our souls to the ordained decrees of a primary decision-maker who does **"all things well"** (Mark 7:37). Regardless of the political climate or direction, our eyes must be fixed upon Jesus.

We then addressed our natural inclinations to *Resist God's Ordination*. In a passage like Romans 13:1-7 we are tempted to immediately tackle all the exceptions to **"subject(ing)"** ourselves to the **"governing authorities...the authorities that exist (and) are appointed by God."** We live in a culture that either ignores or detests authority. Some may argue that the authority figures have behaved so poorly that the temptation to

² *The Westminster confession of faith XXIII,4.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

belittle them, at some level, falls upon their own shoulders. There may be some truth to that. Yet there is nothing virtuous about properly responding to that which is perfect. The is greater virtue (and the more difficult endeavor) is properly responding to the faults, weaknesses and imperfections of those in leadership.

Those in positions of authority (those who Paul and Peter's readers would have naturally considered when reading these words) were quite evil. When Pilate appealed to his own authority to either release or crucify Jesus, Jesus did not dismiss Pilate's authority, but rather told him from whence his authority came. Those in authority may not acknowledge that their authority is from God, but we should. It's been said,

Believers express their commitment to God in how they relate to rulers and the law of the state.³

There should be a general disposition among Christians that they are law-abiding citizens. The primary **"weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh"** (2 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus taught that His,

...kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world (John 18:36).

This is not an argument for pacifism as much as it is an effort to promote the general disposition brought forth in the passage. Our peace is found in Christ and we should seek to be law-abiding citizens, recognizing God's hand in determining our leaders. We continue:

Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil (Romans 13:2-4).

³ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 677). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

A Proper Role-A Proper Response

Keeping in mind that the context for this entire passage goes back to Paul's exhortation to not **"avenge (y)ourselves" (Romans 12:19)**. Vengeance belong to the Lord. And at least one way that God brings about His vengeance is through the civil magistrate, whom He refers to as His ministers three times (twice as *diakonos* and once as *leitourgoi* which carries a more public office sense) in this passage. This beckons us back to the quote by Hodge, where we are tempted to sit on our porch with a shotgun. A good government quells that temptation.

The passage teaches at least two things: the proper *role* of civil authority as well as the proper *response* to civil authority. A breakdown of either of these will affect the other. We have seen an example of this recently in the controversy surrounding the actions of certain citizens and the police.

Not to get into the chicken or the egg here but the disrespect many police officers are experiencing is causing them to draw their weapons or not engage at all for fear of prosecution. Conversely, citizens are becoming more fearful in their interactions with police or are finding themselves unassisted when they're the victim of crimes. A commitment to the teaching found in Romans 13:1-7 would serve nicely to address this widespread issue. Leaders should seek to be just and godly and those under them should seek to respect their posts.

We learn in verse 2 that those who resist these authorities **"will bring judgment on themselves."** This judgment is not to be understood as God's final judgment but a civil judgment by God's minister who bears **"the sword."** There should be an expectation on our parts that our lawless deeds will be met with civil justice. You do the crime, you do the time.

The Apostle then goes on to explain the appropriate role of the civil magistrate.⁴

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you

⁴ It would go beyond our immediate concerns to address how governments tend to reach far beyond what Scripture declares to be the appropriate roles. Suffice it to say that the "beast" in Revelation is a political figure who seeks to control what the population buys and sells (Revelation 13:17). This overreach by governments can, and has had, devastating consequences.

want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same (Romans 13:3).

It is extraordinary that Paul is writing this, fully aware that Jesus, who had only done good (Mark 1:11; Hebrews 4:15), was crucified by a legitimate authority figure. And such would be the same for himself (2 Timothy 4:6) and many other Christians.

A couple of points to be made in light of this: first, Paul is speaking in general terms of the value of God-given government. Governments, even poor governments manned with sinful people, are superior to anarchy. If one is to be surrounded by evil, it is preferable for there to be some societal structure because even evil people want protection. Madness supervised is better than madness run amuck.

The Higher Authority

Second, the record we have of Jesus, John the Baptist, Stephen and others being put to death for their good deeds serves to instruct us that there are times to disregard that which the civil (or other) authorities mandate. It was in response to legitimate **“rulers and elders and scribes”** (Acts 4:5) that Peter and John answered:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge...But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19; 5:29).

Some would argue that this was an act of rebellion on the part of the apostles, but they would be wrong. They would be wrong because the apostles (as should we) recognize the hierarchy of authority. Although we have and should highly regard those whom God has put in authority over us, **“all authority in heaven and on earth”** belongs to Jesus (Matthew 28:18).

This can be a bit of a rough forest to hack through. At what point is the lesser authority’s decision dismissed? At what point has the lesser authority so usurped the authority of God that it must be deposed or rebelled against (as with the founding of our very nation)? The latter may go beyond the time and space constraints of this message. And the former

may have so many applications that it would be a massive enterprise to begin a list, but a basic principle can be observed:

When an authority figure (state, husband, father, elder, employer, etc.) so imposes its power as to require disobedience to the revealed will of God in Scripture, we are to submit to the higher authority and disobey the lower. For example, if your parent or boss or elder tells you to lie, cheat and steal, they are to be disobeyed because the Scriptures-the Lord God-has commanded that you do not.

That principle is simple, but the application can be very difficult. Many read the Scriptures (and rightfully so) in such a way as to place themselves into quite a predicament, especially as the government grows and seeks to oversee every aspect of our existence.

In response to a 1922 referendum by the state of Oregon, which required all children in the state to attend public schools, the great twentieth century theologian J. Gresham Machen wrote:

When one considers what the public schools of America in many places already are – their materialism, their discouragement of any sustained intellectual effort, their encouragement of the dangerous pseudo-scientific fads of experimental psychology – one can only be appalled by the thought of a commonwealth in which there is no escape from such a soul-killing system.⁵

It is one thing for the state to offer education, then allow citizens within the boundaries of their own conscience to utilize it or not. It is quite another thing for the state to require it.

Our nation is involved in the vicious and horrible sin of legalized abortion. But in China abortion became mandatory for those who ventured beyond the legal limit of children. Most people in history have lived in lands with little regard for the law of God. Disregard for the law of God in an arena as massive as government has dire consequences. It is with great sorrow that we watch the beast find willing followers placing his mark upon their heads and hands (thoughts and deeds).

But it takes a very uglier turn when the state begins to require active ungodliness of its citizens. And it is a matter of even greater sorrow when

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans) p. 13.

we see those who profess the faith capitulating-altering their standard of ethics, influenced by the moaning of their surroundings, honoring Christ with their lips but having hearts that are far from Him.

In our next meeting we will discuss what happens when the state refuses to bear the sword and the standards by which the civil magistrate is called to govern. But I would like to finish this morning by appealing to a story in the gospel of Matthew where we see an interaction between Jesus and a centurion (a military officer in charge of one hundred men). It is a story in which Jesus marvels at the centurion's grasp of authority.

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶ "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." ⁷ And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." ⁸ But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." ¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment (Matthew 8:5-13).

We make a distinction in our reading of Scripture-in theology-between Lord and Savior. This is an important distinction to make. Lord *kyrios* means master where Savior *soteri* denotes a deliverer, a preserver, one who rescues us from danger. What may not be so readily apparent is that the one who we are trusting to be our lord is also (at least in that category) the one we are trusting to be our savior.

Husbands are called the head of the household, but they are to use that office to protect their homes. Elders are the head of the church, but they are to use that office to preserve and keep guard over the church.

Magistrates are the authority figures in the state and it is their job to see that no harm comes to the citizens. The one whose wisdom we trust is the one whose protection we trust.

The centurion understood this. That is why he went to Jesus as the one who has all authority and therefore is worthy of all our faith.

Questions for Study

1. What happens in a culture where good laws are not properly enforced (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is the duty of people in relation to civil magistrates (page 3)?
3. How do we find tranquility in politics-in anything (page 3)?
4. Discuss our general disposition toward those in authority (pages 3, 4)?
5. How would a proper understanding of Romans 13:1-7 help our current cultural turmoil (page 5)?
6. How do you explain Paul's explanation of the civil magistrate praising those who do good when they crucified Christ (pages 5, 6)?
7. Is there ever a time to disobey the civil magistrate? Explain your answer (pages 6, 7).
8. What did the centurion seem to understand about authority? What is the necessary relationship between Lord and Savior.