

"The Christian's Duty to Government" • Romans 13:1-7

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Coliseum*

1. A door was opened and they came out in twos and threes as though pushed by a rough hand
 2. Slowly, they gathered themselves together till their number reached three dozen
 3. Then they made their way across the sandy floor of the Coliseum to somewhere near the center
 4. Some men were dragging the lifeless body of a downed gladiator off through another door on the other side of the arena floor
 5. He had been the third spectacle of the day; they were to be the fourth!
 6. Slowly they lifted their eyes and looked around at the sea of faces peering down at them
 7. It was a busy day at the Coliseum; the stands were nearly full
 8. And thousands of eager eyes now looked at them
 9. A trumpet was blown, and all eyes turned to Caesar's box
 10. He held out his hand and everyone stopped breathing to see what his verdict would be
 11. With a snap of his wrist, he threw his thumb down;
 12. And by doing so, sealed the fate of 36 men women, and children
 13. The crowd roared their delight; there would be more blood to satisfy their lust for entertainment this fine Spring day
 14. The gate of an iron cage was dropped, and several lean lions bounded out on to the floor of the arena
 15. The mothers picked up their little children; the fathers put their arms around their teenage sons
 16. Then, as the lions came closer and began to circle the little knot of people, one man among them began to sing a song of praise to Jesus
 17. He was quickly joined by the others till they formed a choir united in song
 18. They took instant solace in the words of they sang; for it spoke of Jesus' death and resurrection, of His love for them and promise to be with them in every trial
 19. It promised them life beyond death
 20. The crowd grew quiet and listened; even the lions seemed momentarily stilled in their thirst for blood
 21. But they again began their circling, even as the voices of the Christians rose louder as their confidence and hope grew
 22. Five minutes later, it was all over;
 23. The lions were no longer as lean as they had been and 36 new souls had just entered the glories of heaven
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24. What enabled that small band of believers, and the hundreds of thousands of others who gave their lives in the first century and a half of church history to stand and sing praise to God instead of hurling angry words of hatred at Caesar and the crowds who came to watch them die?

B. Religion & Politics

1. One of the sacred rules of polite society is that there are two subjects you don't bring up for discussion: Religion & Politics
2. Well, call me a complete social clod, we're going to talk about both of them today
 - a. in fact, even more,
 - b. we're going to see how religion influences politics and
 - c. how politics influences religion
3. And as we do, we'll discover how those brave souls of the first century were able to die so nobly

B. Citizens

1. As Christians, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God
 - a. and as such, we have both rights and responsibilities
 - b. Jesus is our King to whom we owe complete loyalty and obedience
2. But as men & women, we are also citizens of the United States of America
3. And this earthly citizenship carries it's own rights and responsibilities
4. Because we carry a dual citizenship, there will inevitably come times of tension,
 - a. when loyalty to one realm conflicts with loyalty to the other
 - b. this conflict will arise because both realms do not have the same agenda
5. So today we are concerned with looking at the issue of how we, as heaven's citizens, are to relate to Human Government

C. Romans

1. As the Apostle Paul penned this letter to the church at Rome, he knew he was writing to people who faced the daily challenge of living at the seat of world power
2. Rome was the capital of the world
3. And the Empire had already indicated to the Church at several times and places that they weren't all that happy with the new movement
 - a. though the Romans were generally pretty tolerant of the existing religions of the people they conquered
 - b. they were highly leery of new religious movements because they considered them as reactions to their rule
 - c. in their eyes, Christianity was just such an innovation
 - 1) it had started among those troublesome people, the Jews
 - 2) but had rapidly spread to just about every corner of their empire
 - 3) the rumors about what Christians believed and did were running wild
 - 4) and generally, popular opinion was *against* the new movement
 - d. Paul had himself run afoul of the governing authorities at several points

- e. and he knew that the if it hadn't happened already, it was merely a matter of time till the Christians at Rome ran in to their own troubles with the government
- 4. So he writes to them about the Christian attitude toward government

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1-2

{1} **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.**

1. It's one thing for us to read these words from the comfort of 20th Century America and an altogether different thing to see them in their original setting
2. Living here and now, we enjoy the benefits of a free and democratic society greatly influenced by the justice and mercy of the Judeo-Christian world view
3. But when Paul wrote, the countries of the world were dominated by a heavy handed tyrannical system of government called the Roman Empire
4. And he knew that there were many former Jews that comprised the church in Rome
5. Being a Jew himself, he was well aware of the historical bent of his people to rebel against foreign rulers
6. So he wrote these words of instruction and warning
7. So fierce was the Jewish opposition to Rome, that just a few years after this, the Zealots, a Jewish political group, started an uprising that led to the destruction of the temple, most of Jerusalem, and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews
8. These words were meant to forestall just such an outbreak in Rome
9. He said, **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.**
 - a. because God is the Creator, He is the Supreme Authority over all
 - 1) in fact, think about the word "authority"
 - 2) "authority" means the right of the "author" over what is authored, over what is made
 - 3) God is Author of all creation; therefore He has right to rule over it
 - b. so, all authority resides with God
 - c. but He delegates His authority to different people to accomplish His ends
 - 1) we see examples of the delegation of authority every day
 - 2) at work, the supervisor will delegate the foreman under him or her to do a job
 - 3) then the foreman will go to his or her workers and tell them what is expected of them

- 4) when parents send their children off to school in the morning, they are delegating the authority to teach and instruct their child to that teacher
- d. Paul is saying that if you follow the trail of authority backwards, you find God at the top
- e. President Truman had a sign on his desk that read, "The buck stops here."
- f. well, that wasn't really quite true; the buck stops at God's throne
- 10. In order to accomplish His purposes, God has commissioned government among mankind for the purpose of keeping order and restraining evil
- 11. Paul says at the end of verse 1 that the authorities that exist are *appointed* by God
 - a. in Daniel 2:20-21 we read,

(Dan 2:20-21) Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. {21} And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings

- b. in Daniel 5:21 there's this;

(Dan 5:21) . . . the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.

- 12. Now, here's the problem; It's easy to understand how God would appoint a good ruler, but why a wicked one?
 - a. when we read Paul's words in Romans 13:1 & 2, we nod our general agreement that God is the Author of all authority
 - b. but the trouble comes when we consider just how very corrupt the governments of man have been throughout history
 - c. if rulers are appointed by God, then at first blush it seems He hasn't done a very good job of selecting them
 - 1) how do account for a Nero?
 - 2) or an Alaric?
 - 3) how do we explain the rise of a Hitler, a Stalin, a Mao, an Idim Amin, or a Pol Pot?
- 13. First of all, let's make something clear:
 - a. Paul is not saying that every single person who has ever ruled has been a good or righteous ruler
 - b. what he is saying is that the *office* of ruler carries a God-ordained authority
 - c. that authority is the right to rule
 - d. therefore, if a person resists that authority, because it is delegated by God, they are really resisting God
- 14. The individuals who fill the office of ruler will either *use* the authority of their office as God *intends*, or they will *abuse* it
- 15. If they use it as He directs, then they will be rewarded; But if they abuse that authority, they will be judged
- 16. God may allow a wicked ruler to rise to power simply because He honors the choices we make
 - a. and usually the tyrants of history have come to power on the shoulders of their supporters

- b. because God always judges nations in the course of their lifespan in history, He may even allow a corrupt ruler to rise to power as an act of judgment on them
- 17. The point Paul is making in verses 1 & 2 is that the Christian is to recognize & honor the authority of government
- 18. Does this mean then that Christians are to offer blind and total submission to civil government?
- 19. Not at all, there are limits to our submission to government
- 20. And Paul goes on to clarify the proper realm of government authority in the next verses

B. Vs. 3-4

{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.

- 1. Paul is quite clear that the proper role of civil government is law and order
- 2. Their primary function is to restrain evil, and if necessary, by the threat of force
- 3. When government is working in it's God ordained limits, it is **not a terror to good works**
- 4. But it is a terror and threat to **evil**
- 5. He asks a simple question; "**Do you want to be unafraid of authority?**"
 - a. do you want to stay clear of the power of the state to restrain evil by use of force?
 - b. then don't practice evil?
 - c. do you want to avoid a ticket and fine - don't break the traffic laws
 - d. do you want to stay out of prison and jail - don't commit crime
- 6. Instead, "**Do what is good, and you will be noticed**" as a keeper of the law and respected as such."
- 7. In verse 4, Paul is clear in reminding us that God has commissioned the state to wield the sword, meaning He has given the power of capital punishment to the civil government
 - a. capital punishment is the ultimate manifestation of the state's authority to enforce order
 - b. when a person shows a callused disregard for either authority or the sanctity of human life,
 - 1) and his continuation in society at large threatens to tear apart the peace,
 - 2) then God gives the state the right to remove him
 - c. how each government carries that principle out is the subject for another time
- 8. But Paul's point is that God commissions civil government with that authority
- 9. Twice in verse 4, Paul refers to government as "God's servant"
 - a. like any other servant,

- b. those in positions of authority have to give account to God for how they have used it

C. Vs. 5-7

{5} Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.

1. Because civil government is given its authority by God, our relationship to it must be one of **subjection**
2. And this submission to the authority must not be based simply on the fear of the government's **wrath**,
3. But also because as Christians, we have a better understanding of what authority and submission are all about
4. Our **conscience** isn't merely informed by our personal opinions
5. It's framed by the Word of God
 - a. for the believer, defying civil authority isn't merely an issue of breaking man's law
 - b. it's also a violation of the moral law of God
 - c. rebellion isn't merely political revolution
 - d. as it says in 1 Samuel, rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft
6. As Paul speaks of submission to government for conscience's sake, he introduces an important exception
7. What do we do when the government requires us to do something that is clearly against our conscience?
 - a. what do we do when government violates its role as God's servant and instead of restraining evil, promotes it?
 - b. what do we do when we are forced to chose between our loyalty to God and our loyalty to the State?
8. I think I can safely say that there isn't a person here who in principle would say that we can do anything other than obey God and disobey man
9. And we have good biblical warrant for precisely that response in Acts 4 & 5
 - a. Peter and John had been arrested for preaching the gospel in Jerusalem
 - b. they stood before the high court of Israel, the Sanhedrin
 - c. the Jewish officials *demand*ed that they stop preaching in Jesus' name
 - d. yet this is precisely what Jesus had told them to do
 - e. so Peter said to them, "We ought to obey God rather than men."
10. When the laws of man conflict with the Word of God, it's the Lord who hold our final loyalty
11. Yet even then, even when we are forced by necessity to violate the law of man, we are still to maintain a heart of submission to those in authority
 - a. here is where so many go wrong today and have throughout the centuries
 - b. when the ungodly are the rulers and officials and place evil demands on believers,
 - c. all too often the reaction has been one of rebellion and hostile defiance
 - d. but the attitude and character of humble submission must always mark our loyalty to God, especially when that loyalty requires us to refuse the

ordinances of man

12. Let me use another example from scripture: That of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3
 - a. [briefly tell story]
 - b. they disobeyed, but they were never defiant of Nebudchadnezzar
 - c. they quietly stood their ground but did not hurl invectives and abuse at the authorities
 - d. consider another scene: Jesus before Pilate
 - 1) he was silent
 - 2) Pilate asked, "Do you not know I have the power to execute you?"
 - 3) Jesus then said, "You have no power but what has been given you by My Father in heaven."

{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.

13. Paul now gets to the thorny issue of taxes
14. Basically, he says, "Pay them!"
15. There are many who balk at paying their taxes because they disagree with some of the things government does with their money
 - a. the committed pacifist thinks it immoral to support the military
 - b. some patriots think it wrong to spend money on foreign aid
 - c. many of us think it criminal that federal and state money is being used to pay for abortions
16. Think about the man who penned these words and the situation of his day
 - a. the armies of Rome were occupying his homeland
 - b. the taxes he paid were being used to support pagan temples
 - c. and some of the most debauched and perverse immorality ever known to history was taking place in those temples, with the support of the government!
17. But Paul says, "Pay your taxes"
18. Why? Because there are many other services government provides that we benefit from
 - a. roads,
 - b. utilities
 - c. defense
 - d. and the protection of the peace
19. I mean, you may have a hard time with government, but consider the option: No government!
20. John Lennon might like to imagine a world without government, but quite frankly, the idea scares me to death!

III. CONCLUSION

A. *The Heart of the Christian*

1. Listen to these words:

(1 Pet 2:13-17) Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, {14} or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. {15} For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men; {16} as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. {17} Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

2. Amazingly, those words were written by Peter as he sat in his prison cell in Rome
3. The crazed lunatic Nero was Caesar
4. And Christians were being routinely rounded up and executed under his rule
5. Nero was so evil, he even delighted in dipping believers in tar, tying them on poles, placing them at various places around the palace gardens, and then lighting them on fire as night lights so he could drive his chariot at night through the grounds

B. More!

1. When you begin to look at the NT for other passages which speak of the Christian's relationship to governments, you realize there is much other guidance
2. In 1 Tim 2:1-2 Paul wrote, "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men, {2} for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence."
3. To Titus he wrote (Titus 3:1) "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work"
4. The early church took the counsel of Scripture to heart and lived a mighty witness before a hostile world and government
5. One hundred years after the Apostles, a Christian leader named Justin Martyr wrote a letter to the Roman emperor explaining why he ought to lighten up on the Christians
6. [Explain practice of offering a pinch of incense and saying 'Caesar is Lord']
7. "Everywhere we, more readily than all men, endeavor to pay to those appointed by you the taxes, both ordinary, and extraordinary, as we have been taught by Jesus. We worship only God, but in other things we will gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that, with your kingly power, you may be found to possess also sound judgment."
8. Justin Martyr went on to explain that Christians made the best citizens of the Roman empire because they obeyed the civil rulers as an act of Worship and Obedience to Christ

C. Our Call & Duty

1. That is what we are called to
2. Whole hearted obedience to the civil rulers because they are appointed by God
3. Our attitude toward their authority is really a reflection of our attitude

toward God's authority