

Abounding Grace Christian Church

A Study through the Epistle to the Romans – Part 36

I. Exposition of Chapter Thirteen

A. The Christian and Human Government.

1. Verse 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.”**

- a. **“Every soul”** certainly includes all Christians. The command **“...be subject to...”** means **“to arrange under”**; **“to subordinate”** and **“to yield”**. Paul simply says that we should be subject to the governing authorities. The background of this is important for us to understand. This instruction by Paul was probably in response to, and in contrast to, groups of zealous Jews (Zealots) in that day who recognized no king but God and paid taxes to no one but God. They held a revolutionary attitude toward Rome. (cf. **Titus 3:1-3; I Peter 2:13-17**).

“We must support government unless it violates our Spirit-led consciences or demands ultimate allegiance. Civil order is preferable to chaos (cf. 2 Thess. 2:6–7).”¹

“A particular Civil Officer may not be of God. In fact, he may be very wicked like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, etc. However, the PRINCIPLE of Civil Government is of God. THERE COULD BE NO SOCIETY, SECURITY, OR PRIVATE PROPERTY WITHOUT GOVERNMENT! There would be only confusion and anarchy.”²

b. **“For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”**

- 1) Genuine authority could not exist apart from God. God is the moral standard for all authority and is the Divine Author of the principle of authority.
- 2) This is not to suggest that God approves of corrupt government, ungodly officials, or unjust legislation. (NOTE: There have been times throughout history, however, that God allowed evil rulers to have authority for a time. The goal of this, ultimately, was to turn God’s people back to Him. E.g. Nebuchadnessar – **Daniel 4:17; Jeremiah 27:5-7**).
- 3) If the authorities that exist are “appointed” by God, then we conclude that they, whether they realize it or not, are accountable to Him for what they do.

“All authority is of God, is ordained of God, and is subject to God. He is the highest authority. Though the use of the office may be abuse, there is nothing wrong with the office itself.”³

“Remember your Savior suffered under Pontius Pilate, one of the worst Roman governors Judea ever had; and Paul under Nero, the worst Roman Emperor. And neither our Lord nor His Apostle denied or reviled the ‘authority!’”⁴

2. Verse 2 – **“Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.”** Since governments have authority from God, we are bound to obey them.

a. List of exceptions to this:

- 1) Running from persecution - Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt till the death of Herod. **Matthew 2:13-15**.
- 2) Refusing an order to do something evil.
 - **Exodus 1 – Egyptian midwives.**
 - **Daniel 3:8-25 – Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego**
- 3) Refusing to stop preaching the Gospel. (**Acts 4:19-20**).

“But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’” - Acts 5:29

3. Verses 3-4 - **The Job of Government: To punish and deter evildoers.**

a. Verse 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.”**

¹Robert James Utley, *The Gospel according to Paul: Romans*, vol. Volume 5, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 1998).

²William C. Neece, *Study Notes on the Book of Romans* (James L. Fleming, 2005), Ro 12:1–13:14.

³Kevin J. Conner, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Portland, OR: City Bible Publishing, 1999), 363.

⁴William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse by Verse* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1936), 483.

1) The ideal role of government is to bring punishment to the evil worker in order to protect the innocent.

“For civil authorities are not a terror to [people of] good conduct, but to [those of] bad behavior. Would you have no dread of him who is in authority? Then do what is right and you will receive his approval and commendation.” – Romans 13:3 – Amplified Bible

b. Verse 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) **“For he is God’s minister...”** – This phrase is found twice in this verse. The word **“minister”** means, **“one who executes the commands of another, especially of a master, a servant, attendant, minister.”**⁵ So the understood idea here would be that when an authority is exercising authority correctly (**“for good”**), then he is being a **“minister”**, or servant of God. This, of course, does not mean that this person is saved necessarily. (cf. **Ezra 1:1-4, Cyrus**).

2) **“...if you do evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain...”** – This is understood as referring to the most extreme kind of punishment for the most extreme crimes.

“The word “sword” (*machaira*) refers to the small Roman sword used in capital punishment (cf. Acts 12:2; Rom. 8:35). This passage and Acts 25:11 give the New Testament basis for capital punishment, while Gen. 9:6 clearly states the Old Testament perspective. Fear is one effective deterrent to chaos!”⁶

3) **“...an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”** - It is through the just punishment of evil that government serves its function in God’s plan of holding man’s sinful tendencies in check. When a government fails to do this consistently, it opens itself up to God’s judgment and correction.

4. Verses 5-7 – More on the Christian’s responsibility towards Government.

a. Verse 5 – **“Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.”** – Two reasons for submission to civil authorities:

1) Fear of punishment.

2) For the sake of a clear conscience. The believer is supposed to submit based on the principle of wanting to please God, not just because of fear of punishment. This reason is more important than the first one because it speaks of character. We can avoid breaking the law because of fear of punishment without really wanting to do right.

b. Verses 6-7 – These two verses present to us some obligations.

“...taxes...customs...fear...honor.” - We are to give to the government the money, honor, and proper reverence which are due them, all the while reserving our right to give to God that which is due to God alone. (**Matthew 22:21**)

1) **Verse 6** would also imply that the taxes collected are to be used by government to get the job done of restraining evil and keeping an orderly society - not to enrich the government officials themselves.

2) In a democracy, we must understand that there is a sense in which we *are* the government, and should not hesitate to help “govern” our democracy through our participation in the democratic process.

c. In addition we’re to pray for our Governmental Leaders – **I Timothy 2:1-2.**

⁵Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

⁶Robert James Utley, *The Gospel according to Paul: Romans*, vol. Volume 5, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 1998), Ro 13:4.