



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Role of Government and Citizen (Romans 13:1-7)

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When we get together with family and friends, what are the two things we're told NOT to discuss? Religion and politics. Those two topics can torpedo a friendly gathering of otherwise rational people quicker than any other. The interesting thing is that the Bible is not silent about the institution of government, showing what its God-given purpose is as well as what posture citizens should take in relation to governmental leaders.

In addition, there a multitude of helpful examples throughout biblical history that give us even more guidance on how we should handle ourselves in the arena of politics. Romans 13 is an excellent place to start, with some teaching that is very foundational to this point.

Romans 13:1-7 - Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

I. RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT = SUBMISSION

The first phrase of this chapter presents a clear command for how one should respond to government. In a word it is to submit.

This can often be opposite of our natural desire, but isn't that the pattern of Scriptural commands? If you are persecuted, bless them. If you go through trials, be joyful. If you have an enemy, love them. If you want to be great, serve somebody. If you want to save your life, lose it.

Here, Paul makes a blanket statement that we may not want to hear. Whoever you are, in whatever time period you live, however you

might feel about it, no matter how mad or discouraged they make you – submit to your government.

The Greek word for “submit” is actually a military term meaning “to arrange troop divisions under a commander”. Citizens’ submission to governing authorities is literally a lining up in support of the leader.

1 Peter 2:13, 14 - 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 and to praise those who do good.

II. RECOGNITION OF GOVERNMENT = SOURCE

Here is the rationale for submitting to government: “there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God.” In America, we’re told that our leaders derive their power from the consent of the governed. That’s an unbiblical concept, since civil authority comes from God to any leader in any system of government at any point in history

Daniel 2:21 - He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding;

We should be glad we have an opportunity to vote and have access to our representatives, but ultimately God decides who will be in office to carry out his purposes.

John 19:10, 11 - Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

Even leaders who care nothing for God can make good law that honors him and his principles. Since we’re all made in God’s image, there is an imprint of his conscience in each of us.

Romans 2:14, 15 - For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They

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show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

That is why unbelieving lawmakers can outlaw murder or perjury or theft or other evil without knowing their standard actually comes from God.

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD, MANKIND HAS AN INNATE SENSE OF WHAT IS RIGHT AND WRONG. GOOD LAWS ARE MADE BY UNBELIEVERS ALL THE TIME.

III. RESISTING GOVERNMENT = SUFFERING

This text also clearly teaches us that God not only grants authority to civil government to make law, but also to enforce the law. Suffering is promised to the lawbreaker and reward is promised to the one who obeys the law. The role of government is one of protection for law-keepers and punishment of lawbreakers. When Paul says that leaders do not “bear the sword in vain”, he is saying even in matters of capital punishment or just wars, that they are in the right to carry out judgment on evildoers.

Proverbs 20:26 – A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.

While this text tells us to submit, we know from all of Scripture that there are times we can't submit to our leaders. It's rare, but it may happen. In Exodus 1, the Hebrew midwives were told by Egyptian leaders to kill all male Jewish babies and they refused. Daniel refused to obey a Babylonian law that said you can't pray. His friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. In all of these instances, God blessed the ones taking part in civil disobedience.

Anytime human government enacts law that forces followers of Christ to disobey the Lord, believers must obey God. This happened in the first century when Peter and John were told not to preach the gospel. Their response to their leaders was direct.

Acts 4:19, 20 - Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

Resisting government should be very rare. As a rule, law-abiding citizens should have nothing to fear from their leaders if the leaders are acting properly and punishing only wrong behavior.

IV. RESPECTING GOVERNMENT = SERVANT

The last part of today's passage acknowledges that government is authorized to collect taxes and citizens are to pay them as part of their submission. This shows honor, respect and cooperation with the authority that God has delegated to government.

It's very interesting that God refers to human leaders as his servants and ministers. There is a responsibility that governmental leaders have in an accountability to God. Governmental authority does not come without conditions. As we have noted, if ungodly law is established, people have a responsibility to disobey. This should be rare, but Scripture gives us precedent for civil disobedience. The general attitude toward government, though, should be one of respect.

1 Timothy 2:1-4 - First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

It is sad that, for so many, disrespect for leaders marks their thoughts and actions. From Facebook comments to conversations around the water cooler, most people feel it is acceptable to display anger, sarcasm, cynicism and general disdain for public officials. Christian citizens should be on guard for this violation of Romans 13:7, and seek to display an attitude of cooperation and appreciation for all the good that government does as God's minister to us for good.

As for injustice or unwise decisions in government, if Christians aren't forced to disobey God, there still should be submission while working within the system to bring about positive change.