

Chapter 60

Submission to Governing Authorities

(Romans 13:1–7)

In Romans 13 Paul is still working out his call to godliness that began in Romans 12:1–2. Sooner or later Christians in every country have to think about their relationship to the state.

1. **Christians are to be good citizens.** Paul begins with a word of exhortation: ¹*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.* Generally speaking, the Christians are to be good citizens, obeying those in power as the leaders of the land. Spiritual relationships do not overthrow natural relationships. The Christian may not justify lawlessness on the grounds that the state is not Christian. It is not absolute and unconditional, as we shall see, but for much of the time the command stands. Paul gives his reason for this. *For there is no authority except by God's appointment, and the authorities which are there have been ordained by God.* The basis of government is the will of God. We do not have government because of 'the consent of the governed'. God himself controls the authorities that he puts into position (see Daniel 2:21, 37, 47; 4:24–25). Civil disobedience is generally disobedience to God. Paul says: ²*So he who opposes the authority has set himself against God's ordinance: and those who have resisted will bring down judgement upon themselves.* There are exceptions to what he says. The Christian need not obey the state when it opposes the preaching of the gospel (see Acts 4:18; 5:28, 29). The mainstream life of the church is

not subject to the state's detailed control. The Christian may disobey the state at the point where it forbids mercy and justice (as Matthew 2:12 and Exodus 1:17 suggest). We may disobey if the state demands that we sin. Luke 23:6–12, Mark 15:1–5 and John 19:8–11 all tell of incidents in which Jesus was not absolutely obedient to the civic authorities. The apostle Peter also refused obedience on some occasions (Acts 4:18; 5:29). Paul himself was rather unsubmitive in Acts 16:11–40.

2. Christian obedience to civic authority will eventually be vindicated. Paul goes on: ³*For the rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad conduct. Do you wish not to have any 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.* Paul gives another reason why the Christian should generally be submissive to civic authorities. Generally speaking rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Government powers may be awe-inspiring but the Christian is not to be afraid of them. Is Paul only referring to rulers who do their job well? Or is it that this is what the government will do, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly? My own view is: Paul is writing with faith and optimism. What he says is partly what ought to be the case, but also he is taking a long-term view of the matter. Even if Christians are persecuted, in the long run the Christians will be praised! The Romans persecuted Christians for a long time, but eventually the Roman empire declared itself to be Christian.

But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain: he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Government is 'God's servant'. It is ordained by God to protect the life of citizens (see Acts 22:29; 25:11), to enable a peaceable life (see 1 Timothy 2:2). If Christians see that this is God's ordinance for the well-being of the world, they will 'be subject to the governing authorities' (13:1). The state may use its sword; and God has his ways of dealing with sin also. The

Christians will have a respect both for state power and for God's anger against those who oppose his directive. ⁵*Therefore one must be submissive, not only to avoid wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*

3. There is one very practical point and that concerns money!

He says: ⁶*For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are servants under God devoting themselves to this very thing.* Paul says, 'For the same reason – because you want a good conscience – you make a habit of paying your taxes.' Rulers are God's 'servants'! A government leader is an organizer of people's ordinary welfare. They may not realize it but God has put them where they are to serve him. They devote themselves – whether they realize it or not – to serving God. So we contribute financially! ⁷*Pay all of them their dues. Pay taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, and honour to whom honour is due.* Some Christians are traditionalists. They want to keep the same situation in the life of a nation, no matter what happens. They admire leadership by those who are currently in power, leadership by the upper classes! Some Christians are obscurantists. They want to say, 'Politics has nothing to do with us.' Some Christians are doctrinaire democrats. They want a one-person, one-vote democracy, and treat western democracy as if it is the law of God – which it is not!

4. We need a balanced position. (i) Democracy is a matter of wisdom not law. When the situation is right it is perhaps the wisest form of government. But we must not be doctrinaire in this matter. It requires a high degree of consensus in the land. Rulers have to take note of the real situation, not some doctrinaire ideal. (ii) The Christian finds a middle way between aristocracy and democracy-run-wild. He wants to find a style of government that suits his country and involves as many as possible in the leadership process. (iii) We never glory in the state or any particular view of government. Nero was on the throne

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when Paul wrote Romans 13! The state's task is to organize the life of the nation so that peace prevails, needs are met, and there is freedom for everyone to find salvation in Jesus. The peace and freedom of the nation is necessary for the preaching of the gospel. (iv) Christians are to play their part in the life of the country. They support their leaders as much as they can. They are willing to enter politics. A Christian may be a politician, a judge, a lawyer, a policeman, a soldier. (v) We refuse to be doctrinaire, as if some political system will abolish wickedness – which it never will. To many contemporary politicians, the exact carrying out of some cut-and-dried political programme seems the height of political wisdom, but any kind of doctrinaire theorizing might be quite blind to what is actually happening. Forms of government are neither good nor bad in themselves. Paul had to give Philemon advice at a time when half the people in Rome were slaves! Progress towards a better system of government depends on the condition of the country at the time, on the temper of the people, on which approach to government will do the most good in our present situation.