

WHO GOVERNS GOVERNMENTS?

By Steve Zeisler

This is a well-known, often-discussed passage on how Christians should relate carry out responsibilities as citizens of a nation and as servants of God. Ray Stedman used to tell a joke about governments and conscience and taxes, all of which figure in this passage. Someone had cheated on his income tax over the years and felt convicted that he had done so. So he anonymously sent a cashier's check for \$100 to the IRS with a note that said, "I can't sleep, I feel alarmed about what I've done. So I'm sending you this check for \$100, and if I still can't sleep I'll send you the rest."

That sort of response is not what we will find called for in the passage before us as we encounter the thinking of the apostle Paul. Let's read Romans 13:1-7:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

This paragraph appears in the last section of the book of Romans (chapters 12-16). Paul has written of the glory of the gospel and the greatness of God, who saves individuals, overturning the tragedy of sin and giving us the Holy Spirit. He is the God who rules nations. In a great crescendo at the end of chapter 11 he extols the living God in words of dynamic praise. Then turning to believers, he says, "It is only reasonable that we worship this God with our bodies." The rest of the book then talks about our practical response to the greatness of the gospel: How should it make our lives different?

Chapter 12 verse 3 has implications for everything that comes after it: "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." We have each been given a measure of faith. This reference points out the fact that faith grows over time. God has allowed us at the beginning of our Christian walk a measure of faith. As we learn to trust him we deepen our walk with him and learn lessons through hardship, Scripture, fellowship, and so forth. And so our faith grows and deepens. The practical result of faith is that we come to see ourselves more accurately. Mature Christians whose faith is deep understand themselves; they have sober judgment about who they are. They understand that they and others have gifts, that they fit into the plan of God in a particular place, and that they have a calling, responsibilities, and opportunities to make a contribution. The opposite of maturity is thinking of ourselves in exalted terms. It is a declaration of immaturity to demand that our rights and needs and security come before everyone else's.

Now in chapter 13 the issue is still learning not to think too highly of ourselves, or seeing ourselves accurately in relation to the authorities that govern any nation. In submissiveness we find our proper place.

Submissiveness Teaches Us Our Place

There are three words in this passage around which we will gather our thinking: submission, fearlessness, and conscience. Verses 1 and 2 give us great help in understanding in what submission is, what the point of it is, and how it works in our experience. Verse 1 says, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." Every authority exists by the permission of God; there is nothing that runs rampant out of his control. And all powers ultimately find themselves governed by the authority and power of God, who is greater than all. Remember when Pontius Pilate, speaking to Jesus before he died, urged Jesus to listen carefully to his words and threatened him saying, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" And Jesus said, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:10-11).

We may, however, find ourselves kicking against authority structures; angry about our experience with them; railing against the difficulties; and upset that our needs, rights, security, and desires are being trampled upon. But if that is the case, Paul suggests in verse 2 that the problem is not how God is running his universe, but how we are responding to it: We are in rebellion. "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." If we are angrily shaking our fist at God, he will deal with us. He has the right to condemn rebellion against him, and he will bring us into judgment.

Now we need to think more deeply about this, having seen the essential argument. Let's look carefully at some misconceptions that we ought to clear up. First, the word Paul uses is submit (the New American Standard Version translates it, "...be in subjection to the governing authorities"). The concept of submission is not slavish obedience to the governing authorities or being mindlessly controlled by them. Submission is an attitude, a stance of the heart if you will, in which we are predisposed to let God, through government and other authority structures, put limits on where we can go, what we can do, and how we can spend our resources. We have already decided ahead of time that we are not God, he is; and that we will approach institutions of governmental power essentially with a bent knee. That is the starting point.

But to submit does not mean that we will always do what we are told by those who govern. Civil disobedience is well within the right and at times within the responsibility of Christian people. We are submitting to the governing authorities if, when we disobey, we acknowledge that the consequences that follow need to be borne by us.

A couple of Vietnam War era protesters have recently come to light who had been underground, running and hiding for years. One of them participated in the killing of a policeman in Boston. Another was involved in the riots in Chicago in the violent days of the 1968 Democratic Convention there. Now, there were honorable protesters in those days who stood up against what they thought the government did wrong and were willing to accept the consequences for their actions. And ultimately, what they said carried more weight and had more influence on the course of where this nation ended up than those who merely rebelled, acted violently and then ran for their lives.

An example of being submissive while being civilly disobedient is found in Acts 4:18-20. The authorities in Jerusalem forbade the apostles to preach in the name of Jesus. But Peter replied to them, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." He was saying to them, "You have the right to judge, and you are going to have to determine what to do about this, because we are going to continue to preach. We are following the higher Authority." They were jailed and beaten, and later Peter was jailed again. There are any number of references throughout the history of the early church to Christians' following their calling in Christ and receiving the difficult consequences that came from it.

Now to return to the essential nature of submission, Paul is warning us against thinking too highly of ourselves, or the tendency in each of us to prefer ourselves to everyone else. He is warning us that the greatest problem exists within us rather than in the government structures around us. I know people in this community, even some in this church, who are furious about the way lawsuits have come out in which they have been

involved. They rail against evil judges, back-stabbing lawyers, and a hypocritical system that has ruined their lives. People are deeply resistant to and filled with fury over tax laws, the problems that they have gotten into with the government over how much money they owed, and the restricted lives that they have experienced as a result. Divorce settlements can fill people with fury when it seems that the government has acted inappropriately and the laws are wrong.

James wrote in chapter 4 of his letter, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" The angry, unsubmitive, willful person will reply, "Why, it's the stupidity of other people!" But then James continues, "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God." We are called to be submissive because we need to learn the lesson that we think too highly of ourselves, that we would rather be God ourselves than let the Sovereign of the universe be God. And time and again he will allow authorities to exist over us in this life---our boss at work, the legislature of the state, the executive branch of the federal government---precisely to teach us that we need to learn the essential lesson of submissiveness: sober judgment about ourselves, or not thinking too highly of who we are.

So as we drive down the freeway at 70 miles per hour, roaring past the sign that says the speed limit is 55, we have the opportunity to back off the gas pedal and say, "Thank You, I'm not God but You are. You have built restrictions in my life that may seem unreasonable. But having said that, I will submit to the governing authority."

Or your boss comes into your office late in the day, and you're just about ready to take off for the weekend. He dumps a horrendous amount of work on your desk and says, "You have to get this done before you leave." It's completely unreasonable---how dare he? And he has done it before. How did he get to be the boss anyway? All of those thoughts are going through your mind, but in the end you can say, "I must submit to those in authority because I am learning something about my need to not think too highly about myself, my need to submit to a God who is ultimately greater than I am."

You can go into a store to pay too much money for goods that you need and find yourself grumbling about the high cost that is being borne by you as you carry them to the counter, and then realize that even as these are being totaled up, the sales tax will be added on top of that. You can let your face flush in anger, or you can say, "Thank You once again. I am being taught to submit to something I'd rather not because I need to learn something about me."

There is greater danger from what James calls the lawlessness within us than from the restrictions that we encounter in the world. And the reason ultimately that we are free to submit to God is that we believe he cares for us and loves us. In the long run we know that the person who is running everything can be trusted. So we can learn to bow our knee to authorities that he allows to be in place over us.

Fearless Obedience to God's Will

Verses 3 and 4 continue, "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." The first time I read this I was struck by what seemed to me to be enormous naiveté. Paul had lived a long life and had seen the wickedness of the Roman Empire. He had found himself beaten and jailed at times for doing what was right by those who had authority in this world. How on earth could he write such naive ideas? Didn't he realize that this was a Pollyanna-ish approach to things? But I learned a long time ago that when the Bible sounds naive to me, it is usually because I don't understand it or I have a greater problem than I have been aware of. In this case we often read too much into what Paul is saying, and we don't listen carefully to the points he is making.

He says twice that governing authorities, or rulers, are God's servants. The logical mistake we make at this point is to think that Paul is declaring that governments are intrinsically good. But that is not what he is saying. They act for selfish reasons of their own, yet they will serve God's purposes. God will use governments to provide stability in a world where, were it given over completely to anarchy and chaos, everything would be in

question. There would be no opportunity for the gospel. In bringing some stability, governments do good. For Christian people who want to speak of Jesus and live for his sake, they allow us to get on with the greater things of serving the Lord. But the fact that the government is a servant of God doesn't mean that it is so willingly.

In Isaiah 45:1 God called Cyrus his shepherd or servant. Now, Cyrus was a ruthless and unbelieving man, but there would come a time when God would raise him up to punish the empire that had preceded him. In Habakkuk the prophet was told that God was going to bring the Chaldeans, who were among the most ruthless and vicious people imaginable, in judgment on the people of God and others in the ancient world. It was not because they were good, but because it was time for that wicked group to punish the other wicked group that was in place.

God is perfectly able to use as his instruments people and nations and rulers who have not bowed their knee to him. Rulers will do good inadvertently at times. What is behind the apostle's thinking at this point is the recognition that in order for a civilized environment to exist so that a government can succeed and stay in power, it has to provide some kind of level playing field or consistent rules. It has to offer rewards and punishments in a logical fashion so that people can know what to fear and what to aspire to. In the process of doing that, it is going to safeguard itself against rebels, cheaters, liars, and others who would subvert it.

Now, if you as a servant of God are essentially submissive to the government, it is not looking for you. Speed traps with radar guns exist on Alma and Embarcadero here in Palo Alto, I can tell you by hard experience. They are looking for people who are attempting to break the law. If you consistently keep the law, they are not looking for you. They will commend you, in fact wave at you as you go by at the speed limit. The IRS combs through tax returns looking for something out of kilter so they can find the person who is cheating on their taxes. If you are completely honest in the way you pay your taxes, they are not looking for you. What Paul is essentially saying is that even bad governments defend themselves looking for the people who want to ruin them. And if that is not what you are up to, they will more or less leave you alone.

Verse 3 says, "Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?" The question is, do you want to live a life that is fearless? "Then do what is right...." [more precisely in Greek, "Then practice the good."] Back in chapter 12 verse 2 we were told that as our minds are transformed, we know what the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God is. The good is what God's will is for us; we practice what God calls us to. We live in joyful obedience to the will of God, practically, every day.

And if we live that way we can have an essential fearlessness of those in authority. We are not out trying to subvert the government or looking for ways to cut corners. We are not trying to please ourselves and grab advantages that others want. We are not actively claiming our rights and denying the overlapping rights of someone else. What we are spending ourselves on every day is the good: What would the Lord have me do, how can I be about my Father's business?

Now, fearlessness is not the same thing as safety; it may not in fact be very safe to practice the good. There are governments in the world that will aggressively hunt believing people and make their lives miserable--jail them, execute them, forbid Christian assembly, and forbid them acts of mercy and kindness for despised groups of people in the community. There are clearly cases in the New Testament, as we have already pointed out, where practicing the good got believers in trouble. But being fearless means not being guilty of anything. If we are going to be punished for anything, it will be for righteousness. We could be attacked for obeying God, yet in that call there is nothing that we need to fear ultimately, even losing our life for Christ's sake.

One of my favorite scenes in the Bible is that of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail, beaten, put in stocks, and singing hymns at midnight. They weren't safe, but their lives weren't bound by fear. They practiced the good and they were about their Father's business, and he would protect them or not as he chose. And remember what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said to Nebuchadnezzar before they were thrown into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3): "Whether we live or die is up to God. But we will not worship you." They were not safe, but they also were free from fear. We can live lives that are freed from fear, that have no guilt dragging us down, that don't make us look over our shoulder all the time wondering if the dark and rebellious parts of us are going to be discovered. And like submission, this kind of fearlessness is an inner quality that has to do

with our hearts.

Honor Those Who Are Honorable

Let's look at the last section, verses 5-7: "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

The line about the authorities' giving their full time to governing reminds me of a quip by Will Rogers. I have a picture in my mind of bureaucrats in Washington or Sacramento grinding away hours and hours, burning the midnight oil to find ways to expand government. The idea that there are people spending all their time governing is a frightening thought, except for Rogers' point that he was, "grateful that we don't get as much government as we pay for."

In verse 5 Paul said that possible punishment is one means by which we are impelled to do right. But he says here that there is a better reason, and that is your conscience. Do right because those in government deserve respect as people who are made in the image of God. They are there by the permission of God. We have a responsibility to not just treat the whole enterprise of government as some kind of machine, but to acknowledge the people involved. We ought to pay taxes where we owe them, but give respect where we owe that as well. Those who are honorable we ought to treat with honor.

I have a friend who can't stand Bill Clinton. He can't abide his policies and doesn't like his moral character, and at the drop of a hat will give you any number of reasons why he thinks what he thinks about Clinton. But he told me the other day that he had decided before the Lord that he had to stop listening to Rush Limbaugh because he liked what he was saying too much. And it was actually this passage that bothered him. He said underneath all Limbaugh's commentary is not just an attempt to attack policies or sort out what is and is not true or right. There is a mean-spirited ridicule, a personal attack in it as well. He said, "It gets to my flesh and I eat that stuff up. It's poisoning me, I can't listen to it." Some of the cruelest jokes I have heard in the last couple of years are about Chelsea Clinton. That is wrong, and our consciences ought to bother us if we are failing to honor those who because of their position deserve honor and respect.

These verses do not make it easy for us to decide what to do in every setting. Knowing that we must be submissive to government, we do not have a manual that tells us at what times we may have to withstand the government. But in doing the good we may indeed have to say no to governmental authority. We need to be involved; we should try to change government and make it better. Christians in other eras have been too uninvolved.

But we ought to ask this question of our involvement: Are we doing it for selfish reasons? Do we want our particular piece of the pie to get bigger, or is there some issue of justice or righteousness or truth that we are fighting for? We invest government with too great a place in the whole scheme of things. We fear it too much. And we long to control the levers of power in government so we can do God's work for him, as if that were the main way he got work done in the world. We want its power too much instead of trusting the God who stands behind it.

It has been pointed out by a number of people that most nations end up getting the government they deserve. The profound question we ought to ask ourselves is whether the church is influencing the life of everybody enough. Are we dispelling the darkness sufficiently that those people who are elected will learn to think rightly and to see the truth? Will they make good decisions because of the spiritual influence of Christian people, rather than being forced to by some political pressure group? Have we had the influence that the church ought to have as salt and light in the communities where we live?

Here is an anecdote told by Charles Colson last year in a speech he gave when he received the Templeton Prize. He talked about the enduring revolution of the cross of Christ:

I witnessed a prison in Brazil like none I had ever seen before [Colson works with Prison

Fellowship International]. Twenty years ago in the city of San José Dos Campos, a prison was turned over to two Christian laymen. They called it Humaita, and their plan was to run it on Christian principles. The prison has only two full-time staff. The rest of the work is done by inmates. Every prisoner is assigned another inmate to whom he is accountable. In addition, every prisoner is assigned a volunteer family from the outside that works with him during his term and after his release. Every prisoner joins a chapel program or else takes a course in character development. When I visited Humaita I found the inmates smiling, particularly the murderer who held the keys and opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw people working industriously. The walls were decorated with biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs.

Humaita has an astonishing record. The recidivism rate is four percent, compared to seventy-five percent in the rest of Brazil and the United States. How is that possible? I saw the answer when my inmate guide escorted me to the notorious punishment cell, once used for torture. Today, he told me, the block housed only a single inmate. As we reached the end of the long concrete corridor and put the key into the lock, he paused and asked, "Are you sure you want to go in?" "Of course," I replied impatiently. "I've been in isolation cells all over the world." Slowly he swung open the massive door and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the Humaita inmates; the prisoner, Jesus hanging on the cross. "He's doing time for the rest of us," my guide said softly.

In that cross, carved by loving hands, is a holy subversion. It heralds change more radical than mankind's most fevered dreams. Its followers expand the boundaries of a kingdom that can never fail--a shining kingdom that reaches into the darkest corners of every community, into the darkest corners of every mind; a kingdom of deathless hope, of restless virtue, of endless hope. This work proceeds, this hope remains, this fire will not be quenched--the enduring revolution of the cross of Christ.

Catalog No. 4355
Romans 13:1-7
22nd Message
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February 6, 1993

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