

## The Government is God's Servant (Part II): Romans 13:1-7

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Two weeks ago I preached on this same passage that I'm going to preach from this morning. My aim in that sermon was to expound the straightforward message of this text, which is to submit to the governing authorities. I had 5 headings: providence, authority, respect, prayer, and gratefulness. We talked about God's providence over the governing authorities, the concept of authority itself, our duty to show respect toward the governing authorities, to pray for the governing authorities, and we should also be reminded to be grateful for the freedoms we enjoy in this country due to the way our government is set up. It's not perfect, by any means, but comparatively we have it very good here in the United States. That was the sermon 2 weeks ago.

This morning I want to deal with a couple other questions that come up in our minds when we consider this text. You can think of this sermon as a continuation of the one two weeks ago.

The three brief points this morning will be as follows. First, government must submit to God's standards. Second, when government gets it wrong. And third, the government's authority to bear the sword.

### **Government Must Submit to God's Standards**

Notice in this passage the language of good and bad, the contrast between what is good and what is wrong, and the contrast between those who do good and those who are wrongdoers. Look at verses 3-4, "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, 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." (Romans 13:3-4, ESV)

The point I want to make here is simply that the government is not a law unto itself. There is transcendent truth. There is God's standard of right and wrong, good and evil, that exists independent of what the government says. God's standard is supreme, and the government is obligated to administer justice accordingly. The government must submit to God's standards and act in accordance with God's standards. The government should be enforcing God's standards.

That's a brief and simple point, but a very important one. Because it leads into the next point, which is the question that quickly comes to our minds when we read this passage. The question has to do with when government gets it wrong.

### **When Government Gets It Wrong**

What are Christians to do when the government ends up on the wrong side of a moral question? We're caught in a dilemma. We are given many commands in Scripture of what we are to do and what we are not to do. We're also told very clearly here in this passage, without qualification, that every person is to be subject to the governing authorities.

So the unavoidable question is, "What if God's Word is telling me one thing and the government is telling me the opposite?" Let's look at some biblical examples of this.

At the very beginning of the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, we read of the horrific situation in Egypt at that time. Pharaoh was oppressing the Israelites to such an extreme that he had ordered that all the male babies be killed. Pharaoh told this to the Hebrew midwives. He told them "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." (Exodus 1:16, ESV)

What were they to do? Should they obey Pharaoh? After all, Pharaoh was the governing authority over them. But the thing Pharaoh was telling them to do was inherently evil. And just because Pharaoh was commanding it doesn't make it right.

The next verse says, "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live." (Exodus 1:17, ESV) The text goes on to tell us that God blessed these midwives for their decision to uphold God's standards rather than obey Pharaoh's wicked commands. So here's a case where God-fearing people were commanded to do something that God forbids. God says in the 10 commandments, "You shall not murder." Therefore they could not obey the governing authority.

We find a couple other interesting examples of this in the book of Daniel. One of these was read earlier in this service, from Daniel 3. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow down to the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. They were commanded to do so. Everyone was commanded to do

so. The King ordered this. And the King was furious when he found out that these men would not obey his orders.

I'm struck by the boldness and courage of these men. After the King's threat of throwing them into the fiery furnace, these men replied, "If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.'" (Daniel 3:17–18, ESV)

I love those words. They have confidence in God's power to deliver them from the King's wicked schemes. But they don't presume upon God's deliverance. They don't know if God will deliver them or not. But either way, they know that they cannot bow down to an idol, just because a King orders them to do so. Again, it's a situation of being commanded to do something that God forbids. Another one of the 10 commandments says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God . . ." (Exodus 20:4–5, ESV)

The happy ending of that story is that God did deliver them in a most miraculous way, in a way that made it unmistakable that God Almighty had spared them. God clearly blessed these men for refusing to obey the King's command.

And then in chapter 6 Daniel faced a similar hardship. Darius was tricked by his advisors, by their conspiracy against Daniel. These presidents and satraps who were jealous of Daniel, they came to this conclusion, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.'" (Daniel 6:5, ESV)

I think that makes a profound point about the question of when to disobey the government. Daniel was an exemplary citizen, an exemplary leader. There was nothing about his life to criticize. The tabloids had nothing on him. His opponents couldn't dig up any dirt on this guy. He wasn't doing anything dishonest behind the King's back. He wasn't a lazy worker or a cheat or a liar. He was a man of integrity and was obedient to the King in every possible way.

And therefore when a situation arose that demanded disobedience, Daniel's disobedience really meant something. The law that these sneaky advisors presented to the King was to forbid

anyone from making a petition to any god or man other than the King, or else they'll be thrown into the lions' den. The King thought that sounded nice—people can't pray to anyone other than me—so he signed it into law.

And then the Bible tells us, "When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously." (Daniel 6:10, ESV)

The King was distraught when he found out how he had been tricked. He thought so highly of Daniel, and hated the thought of losing him. But the law had to be upheld. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, but God spared him. God blessed Daniel for his decision to keep praying even though he was forbidden by law to do so.

This situation is a bit different than the first two we looked at. With the Hebrew midwives, and with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, it was a matter of being commanded by the authorities to do something God forbids. With Daniel, it was an issue of being forbidden of doing something that God requires. He must pray to and worship God, and no law could keep him from continuing that.

And this was the nature of what the apostles faced in Acts 5, which is the last example I want to give. The apostles had been imprisoned by the religious authorities. But in the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out. Needless to say, come morning this caused a lot of confusion. The authorities finally found the apostles teaching in the temple. So they brought them back before the council. And the high priest said, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." (Acts 5:28, ESV) There's the clear command from the authorities. Don't teach in Jesus' name. Don't preach the Gospel.

Peter and the apostles responded with these words, which really sum up this whole point about when it's necessary to disobey the authorities. They said, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) In other words, if the commands of men contradict the commands of God, we must obey God. Yes, we are called to be submissive to the governing authorities. That is the general principle, and we should uphold that if at all possible. But if a situation arises where there is a direct opposition between what

God requires of us and what the authorities require of us, then we will need to disobey the governing authorities.

The specific matter here was preaching the Gospel. This is something that Jesus personally told His disciples to do. And this applies to us as well—all who are followers of Christ. He said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19–20, ESV)

The apostles were obeying that command. They would not be silenced even if put in prison. They would not be silenced even in the very presence of the high priest who was telling them not to speak about Jesus. Right after they said, “We must obey God rather than men” they proceeded to give a summary of the Gospel message.

They said, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:29–32, ESV)

They were not afraid to boldly proclaim this Good News. And we, at this church, are not shy about proclaiming this message. May God give us boldness to continue preaching these things and sharing these things with those around us, even if persecution comes. We want everyone to know who Jesus is. We want everyone to know what Jesus did for sinners. He died in our place. He took that sin upon Himself and paid the penalty for us. And He rose from the grave on the third day. So all those who turn from their sin and trust in Jesus will be forgiven. I hope you believe that. And I hope you will boldly share that with others, even if they mock you, even if it’s uncomfortable, and even if someday the government tells us not to.

So we have these examples of disobeying the authorities in circumstances where there is a command to do something that God forbids or when something is forbidden which God requires. The Hebrew midwives were commanded by Pharaoh to murder. They could not obey. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were commanded by Nebuchadnezzar to worship an idol. They could not obey. Daniel was commanded not to pray. He could not obey. The apostles were commanded not to evangelize. They could not obey.

The application for us is to do likewise. We must obey God rather than men. If the government wants us to stop meeting together for worship, wants us to stop reading the Bible, wants us to stop evangelizing, we will need to disobey. Or if the government wants to force us into some direct involvement with abortions or direct support of same-sex marriages, we will need to disobey.

This brings up the question of taxes. Are we, because of national health care measures in recent years, indirectly supporting abortion through our taxes? And if so, should we stop paying our taxes? I believe the answer is that we continue to pay our taxes but also use the freedom we have in this country to work against the ideology that promotes abortion and work against the legislation that allows and supports abortion. But if, in a more direct way, a doctor were to be put in a situation where he or she is somehow obligated to perform abortions, that doctor would need to refuse to take part in that.

Now that same-sex marriage is legal in Pennsylvania as well as so many other states, it raises questions about where this will lead. Here is another matter where the government is in the wrong. Marriage is defined by God as a union between a man and a woman. To say that marriage can be between a man and a man or a woman and a woman is false, even if a judge says it's legitimate. Might does not make right. Down the road, if churches are pressured to host same-sex weddings, if pastors are pressured to officiate those weddings, we cannot comply. We certainly care about those individuals—those living in a homosexual lifestyle. We should have no personal prejudice toward anyone. But we cannot condone something God forbids. Even if there would be consequences. Even if it would jeopardize our tax-exempt status, even if it would jeopardize our property rights or our freedom. We must obey God rather than men.

### **The Government's Authority to Bear the Sword**

The last point I need to touch on from this passage is the government's authority to bear the sword, which is mentioned in verse 4. This brings up another controversial topic, namely, capital punishment. Is it legitimate for the government to execute wrongdoers?

The other passage we need to consider here is Genesis 9, which speaks to the value of human life. This is following the great Flood. At the beginning of chapter 9, after God tells Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply, he says that animals will fear them. And then in verse 3 He says, "Every moving thing that

lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” This shows us the drastic difference between human life and animal life. Human life is infinitely more valuable and precious. Animals can be used for food. We have clear biblical sanction there to eat meat. That’s one of the reasons God put animals here. That doesn’t mean we can be cruel to animals. Proverbs says, “Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). Animals aren’t here for us to torture or torment. But we are allowed to kill and eat.

This is not true when we talk about human life. Human life is on a different level, because we are made in God’s image. And therefore it is an extremely serious offense against God to take the life of another human being. God shows us how serious it is by establishing capital punishment as the appropriate penalty for murder. Verse 6, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” Murder is so serious that the murderer ought to be executed.

The kind of punishment that God commands in Genesis 9 is appropriate and just, and a healthy society will have a respect for human life and will demonstrate that respect by putting to death those who murder. Of course, there needs to be great care in seeing that this is exercised justly, without bias. Every effort needs to be made to assure that individuals are not sentenced to death for crimes they did not commit. But those difficulties are not reason to throw out capital punishment altogether.

The value of human life warrants that first-degree murder should be punished with death. That’s not inhumane. It’s just. It’s right. It shows that the life of the person who was murdered is that precious, that valuable, that the murderer forfeits his or her right to life. Some people accuse Christians of contradicting themselves by being against abortion but for capital punishment. But this is not contradiction at all when we understand the sanctity of human life. Capital punishment upholds the sanctity of the person’s life who was murdered.

Romans 13:4 tells us that it’s the government that holds this power to punish the wrongdoer. “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.” (Romans 13:4, ESV)

There’s an important lesson here regarding justice and punishment. The wrongdoer deserves punishment. C. S. Lewis wrote a very interesting essay on this subject entitled, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment.” He’s responding to those

who feel that the punishment of criminals should be primarily concerned with rehabilitating the criminal and also deterring others from crime. The murderer should be dealt with in such a way that he receives therapy that will deal with whatever problems he has that led him to kill someone. He should also be punished to a sufficient extent that others would be reminded that they, too, will be punished if they do something similar. But to execute a murderer, on this view, is inhumane. Two wrongs don't make a right. Others have been murdered. Why kill again? That's the way many people think regarding capital punishment.

C. S. Lewis responds to that way of thinking by asserting the concept of just punishment. If rehabilitation is our main goal, justice goes by the wayside. If deterring others is the main goal, justice goes by the wayside. So even though the "humanitarian" theory of punishment may sound very merciful, it actually compromises the very principle of justice.

Notice again the connections in Romans 13:4. The government will bear the sword in punishing those who do wrong. In doing so the government is an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Remember in chapter 12 we learned that we, personally, are not to avenge ourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. Well, one way that God manifests His wrath is through the government carrying out just punishment against those who do wrong. There is no hint here of rehabilitation or deterrence. Not that those are entirely wrong goals. They just can't be the main thing. The essential matter in punishing wrongdoers is justice. Those who intrude upon the rights of others deserve to have their own rights restricted. And in the extreme cases of murder . . . when a person intrudes upon the right to life, then the murdered forfeits his own right to life.

I know that these questions of civil disobedience and capital punishment raise lots of questions in our minds. If you have a question that you'd like to discuss further, I'd love for you to come and talk to me about it, or send me an email. I do plan to have some blog posts in the coming week or 2 that will follow up on these discussions.

In closing we can meditate on what each of us deserves for our sins. We deserve justice, which means we deserve punishment. Maybe you haven't actually taken someone's physical life. But Jesus tells us that our anger is on par with murder. That doesn't mean we exercise capital punishment for fits of anger. But it does mean that in God's eyes our anger is a very serious matter. And for our many sins (anger, lust, greed, jealousy . . .) we deserve eternal spiritual death. The Good News is that



Jesus came to earth and took the death penalty for us. Jesus went to the cross, which was the means of capital punishment in that day, and was absolutely horrific when compared to the electric chair or lethal injection. To die on a cross was torture. The government then had no qualms with inflicting cruel and unusual punishment. For Jesus it wasn't just the physical torture that made it so difficult. It was the spiritual agony of bearing His Father's wrath. The Father inflicted Jesus with the penalty that our sin deserves.

So the Good News for me and for you this morning is that we can have life. Even though we deserve death, we can have life, because of what Jesus did. All those who turn from their sins and cry out to Jesus will be forgiven. He takes our death and gives us life.