

Cornerstone Baptist Church

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

(1 Corinthians 10:31–33 ESV)

The Christian And The State

August 23rd, 2020

Romans 13:1-7

Acts 5:27-32

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bibles with you and that you are able to open them now to Romans 13:1-7. This morning we are going to be talking about The Christian And The State.

As you may know, this is a LIVE issue within our wider tribe.

John MacArthur – the “Grandfather of American Evangelicalism” as he is sometimes called - decided two weeks ago to DEFY the State of California’s restrictions on indoor gatherings. On August 14th a Los Angeles county judge denied the county’s request for a temporary restraining order against MacArthur and his church but then on Saturday night that decision was reversed, and then a few days ago – that reversal was reversed – leaving everyone confused and uncertain as to whether this a wise and necessary course of action.

Now I want to be very clear – the purpose of this sermon is neither to affirm or condemn John MacArthur. The situation in California is very different than it is here – but his actions have encouraged us to think through this very sensitive issue – and that’s a good thing.

I’ve said many times that I believe that this whole COVID19 pandemic is a giant dress rehearsal. This is a MILD CATASTROPHE that will afford the church the opportunity to think through all manner of issues we will need to have nailed down when the REAL STORM comes. I believe

that. And so we're taking the opportunity this morning to think about something – that we will need to have biblical convictions on in days to come.

The plan for this morning is pretty simply. We are going to look at two passages – the one that gives us the general rule and the one that gives us the recognized exception.

We begin with the general rule as recorded for us in Romans 13:1-7.

I've mentioned before that the Book of Romans is divided into two parts. In the first 11 chapters Paul is talking about the Gospel – he is talking about how we are saved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – thanks be to God!

Then in chapter 12:1 and following he is talking about how to LIVE as the people of God.

So this is not about how to get saved – this is about how to live as a Christian in the world. Thomas Schreiner gives this whole section of Romans the title: “God’s Righteousness in Everyday Life”. That’s what we’re talking about today. In Romans 13:1-7 we discover that God expects a certain attitude in his people toward the government as an aspect of their character and witness.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

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. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For 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, ⁴for 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. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay 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. (Romans 13:1–7 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Douglas Moo says something very interesting here, he says:

“Few passages of Scripture have been studied and analyzed over the years more than Romans 13:1-7. This history of interpretation has largely been the history of attempts to avoid what the passage at first sight plainly seems to be saying.”¹

Did you hear that?

Moo is saying that most evangelicals do here what we criticise the liberal and mainline Christians for doing with 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 6. They go to those texts about gender and sexuality with their minds made up and they TWIST the Scriptures to conform to their own presuppositions.

And we are critical of those folks – and rightly so. But when it comes to this passage, we tend to give ourselves a pass. We WANT to disobey the government – we ASSUME THAT WE CAN, and therefore we work very hard to suggest that this passage means something other than what it plainly says.

So let’s try very hard not to do that this morning – let’s just look at the text – courageously, honestly and fairly so as to discover together the general rule that it contains.

The General Rule:

I think we can agree that the text is saying 4 very important things. It is saying first of all that:

1. Submission to the state is an aspect of our submission to God

That’s the first thing Paul says:

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Romans* in The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 424.

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 (Romans 13:1–2 ESV)

Sometimes Christians who want to rebel against the state will accuse people who are submitting to the state of committing idolatry. They will say: “You’ve made an idol of the state! We’re supposed to obey God, not the state!”

But that’s a false dichotomy – Paul makes it clear here that we obey God BY obeying the state. For there is no authority except from God – therefore whoever RESISTS the authorities, resists what God has appointed.

So – obeying the state – IS OBEYING GOD.

Now you say, wait a second – maybe Paul was assuming here the existence of a CHRISTIAN STATE – then it would be true that to submit to the state would be to submit to God. But that’s not what Paul says – and that’s not what the Bible says anywhere. Old Testament and New – and this is the second thing I want you to see here -

2. Submission to the state is required regardless of the state’s disposition toward God

When Paul wrote Romans 13:7 NERO was Caesar of Rome. To state the obvious, Nero was not a Christian. In fact Nero might have been the LEAST CHRISTIAN ruler in the history of the universe. And still Paul could say:

“there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (Romans 13:1 ESV)

The Apostle Peter said the same thing – about the same Caesar. He said:

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme,¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil

and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.” (1 Peter 2:13–15 ESV)

Our job as Christians is not to burn the house down. Our job is not to UPEND corrupt social institutions. Our job is to build alternative communities – to be a city on a hill – and to preach a life changing Gospel and fighting the government is not going to help us do that. The Apostle Paul told his people:

“aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you” (1 Thessalonians 4:11 ESV)

He urged them:

“that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1–4 ESV)

Paul told us to keep our eye on the mission!! The mission is to see people SAVED and we need peaceful conditions in order to do that, so starting a war with the government is maybe not our best play.

The third thing I want you to see here comes out of verse 4 and verse 7. According to the Apostle Paul:

3. Extraordinary authority is given to the state to suppress evil and to encourage good

In verse 4 Paul says that the king or the state – does not bear the sword in vain. He has extraordinary authority in order to execute his God given mandate. That he “bears the sword” - legitimately - implies that HE has authority to make war and to execute criminals. F.F. Bruce says here:

“The state is thus charged with a function which has been explicitly forbidden to the Christian (12:17a, 19).”²

Bruce references Romans 12:17a and 19. Those verses say:

Repay no one evil for evil (Romans 12:17a ESV)

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19 ESV)

So individual Christians are not allowed to pursue personal vengeance. We cannot make war on our enemies – we cannot execute sentence upon the wrong doer – on the contrary, as Jesus said, we have to turn the other cheek, we have to pray for those who persecute us.

BUT.

The state can do those things.

The king can do those things.

The government can make war on our enemies and the government can use force and execute deadly sentence upon the wrong doer.

That is EXTRAORDINARY authority – and according to the Bible, it comes from God.

The government is also allowed to levy taxes. It costs money to send an army and it costs money to recruit, train and deploy police officers. So the government has authority to levy taxes upon their citizens – and Paul says, you have a responsibility to pay your taxes.

“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.” (Romans 13:7 ESV)

²F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 236.

Submit to the government, pay your taxes – and do it with a respectful attitude – that is what the Bible requires of every citizen – and refusing to do that comes at a significant cost.

That's the fourth thing I want you to see here:

4. Those who resist authority incur judgment from men, from God and from conscience

Look at verses 4-5:

“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.” (Romans 13:4–5 ESV)

Paul says, if you rebel against the government you will face the sword of the king, the wrath of God and the objections of your own internal conscience.

That's the one we never think about. The human conscience is like an internal sensor – it isn't perfect. New believers are often FALSELY tormented by their conscience – Paul talks about that in 1 Corinthians 8. There is a sense in which the more we read our Bibles the more accurate our consciences become.

But when you intentionally push through the warnings of your conscience – you dull its power and effect.

Your conscience is like a sharp metal triangle inside your fleshy little heart. When you do something wrong – it turns a little bit – and it carves you up inside. You hurt and that tells you that you have taken a misstep.

That's good.

But if you press through conscience – it is like CARVING A FURROW in your heart. And now your conscience can spin and spin and spin and you don't feel a thing. And that's a dangerous place to be Paul says. Because now your house is on fire and you can't hear the alarm.

So don't do it. Don't FORCE YOUR WAY PAST THIS PASSAGE. You'll get in trouble with the law, with God – and with your own conscience.

That's the GENERAL RULE – obey the governing authorities as having been instituted by Almighty God.

Now – what about the exception?

Turn in your Bibles to Acts 5:27-32.

The situation here is that the city of Jerusalem was literally on fire with Gospel fervour. Acts 5:14 says:

“**more than ever** believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:14 ESV)

So people were abandoning Judaism and pouring into the church in never before seen numbers – and so the authorities decided to act. They arrested the apostles and put them in prison. However, an angel opened the prison doors and brought them out and told them in verse 20:

“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” (Acts 5:20 ESV)

So, they went back to the temple and were preaching to the people – and the authorities were not impressed.

They sent the captain of the guard to arrest them again and they brought them immediately before the counsel. We pick up the story at verse 27:

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them,²⁸ saying, “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.”²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:27–32 ESV)

Did you catch that? Peter, the same guy who said:

Honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:17 ESV)

Here says:

“We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29 ESV)

So we have a recognized exception to the general rule:

The Recognized Exception:

1. If the state forbids us to do what God has commanded us to do then we must obey God rather than men

Jesus told them to fill the world with the message of the Gospel in Luke 24:47 and then an Angel of the Lord tells them to keep doing that in Acts 5:20 – so when the government forbids them to do that, Peter didn’t hesitate for a second; he said:

“We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29 ESV)

He knew that decision would come at a cost – and it did. Verse 40 says:

“they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted

worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (Acts 5:40–42 ESV)

So they took their beating with a cheerful spirit – rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name – and then they went right back out to do what the Lord told them to do – thanks be to God!

John Stott summarizes the whole situation for us – having in view both passage; he says:

“We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God.”³

Now before we move on to application we need to deal with the standard objection:

The Standard Objection:

1. But what about the Nazis?!

The NIV Application Commentary reminds us:

“Almost every interpretation of Romans 13 written since 1945 explicitly brings the situation of Hitler’s Germany into the discussion.”⁴

This whole system of RULE and EXCEPTION seems too neat to some people, particularly given the horrors of Nazi Germany. What about that? If your government is taken over by TYRANTS who are bent on the destruction of an entire race of people aren’t we OBLIGATED to resist them? Doesn’t that historical REALITY somehow DISPROVE the validity of the Bible’s approach?

That is the objection – you see it on social media, you hear it on university campuses.

³John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 342.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *Romans in The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 427.

But I'm not sure it carries the force that some people think it does.

It seems to me that the Bible can handle that objection very well. When Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to participate in his genocidal plan – what did the midwives do? Exodus 1:17 tells us:

“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)

And God honoured them – the text says:

God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong.
²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. (Exodus 1:20–21 ESV)

So again, I think the Bible can handle this one. If the government of this country attempts to recruit us into an attempt to annihilate an entire race of people – we have FULL BIBLICAL PERMISSION to resist that plan – actively and passively – with a completely clean conscience. We can hide people in the church – I will help you dig the shelter.

So I'm not sure that this objection in any way invalidate the biblical principles that we are discussing – but you can't have this discussion without at least addressing it. And now we have – and we still have a general rule and a recognized exception.

So let's talk about how to apply those things in a COVID19 world.

The Contemporary Application:

In order to do that, the first question we're going to have to answer is this:

1. Have we reached the Biblical threshold for civil disobedience?

Now some, obviously are saying yes. The Bible commands us to gather together for worship. Hebrews 10:24-25 says:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ **not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV)

So the Bible commands us NOT TO NEGLECT meeting together – and the state has forced us to neglect meeting together – so doesn't this situation TRIGGER the exemption clause in Acts 5:27-32?

In order to answer that we probably first need to understand what exactly it is that the Apostle is saying here. The word that he uses here – translated as “neglecting” means:

(in a bad sense) to desert: — forsake, leave.⁵

So this is really a rebuke to people who under value and under attend corporate worship. This is a verse you need to meditate on if you go to the cottage for 3 months a year and NEGLECT the corporate worship of the church.

This is a passage you need to meditate on if your kids are so involved in competitive sports that you only end up coming to church 10-12 times a year – that's NEGLECTING the assembling of ourselves together – but for most of church history we did not consider this text as an excuse to defy public safety orders.

Richard Baxter, for example, the old Puritan pastor in his book *A Christian Directory* dealt with this issue directly in question 109:

Question 109: May we omit church-assemblies on the Lord's day, if the magistrate forbid them?

Answer: 1. It is one thing to forbid them for a time, upon some special cause, (as infection by pestilence, fire, war, etc.) and another to forbid them statedly or profanely.⁶

⁵Strong's Greek Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. “paragraph 1.

⁶ As cited here: <https://davenantinstitute.org/christ-and-caesar-a-response-to-john-macarthur/?fbclid=IwAR09N9ctB-3SJ-tPp8QII0sxC9vWpMvlvmSg8dczkqFlvzmPRonuEreIUcU>

So his answer, basically is “it depends”. If there is a good reason SUCH AS for infection caused by pestilence – and if the restriction is temporary in nature then yes, the magistrate may restrict meetings and we should submit to them in that decision.

So – no, I don’t think this situation triggers the exception clause in Acts 5:27-32.

The government has not FORBIDDEN us to assemble for corporate worship – there was a temporary ban on large group gatherings that has subsequently been relaxed. What we’re dealing with now is basically a temporary reduction in our building capacity. We used to be able to get around 650 people in here – now we are limited to about 238 – for the duration of this pestilence.

Brothers and sisters, that’s inconvenient but it is not persecution and it doesn’t force us into a position of disobedience with respect to the commandments of the Lord. The Bible doesn’t say how often we should meet – it just says that we should not NEGLECT whatever meetings that we have. But in the interests of public health in a time of pandemic, we may and we should submit to the government restrictions on gathering size and safety protocols.

A temporary reduction of our building capacity and a temporary requirement that we wear protective face coverings – does not violate any commandment in the Bible that I’m aware of – and therefore it does not trigger the exception clause in Acts 5:27-32.

And that leads us to our second, very important question:

2. At what point in this scenario would we be justified in disobeying the state?

Part of the challenge of this pandemic is that it has been caused by a NOVEL CORONAVIRUS. The prefix “novel” means new – as in, we have seen this before – and that means that the science is evolving. What the experts were saying 5 months ago is very different than what they are saying now, and that is very frustrating.

And of course that begs the question – can I as a Christian disobey the state if I disagree with their conclusions and required protocols?

That seems to be the default opinion of many Christians. Folks are saying: “Pastor, I saw on the internet that masks are not be effective in reducing the spread of COVID19 – that’s why I am disobeying this particular mandate”.

But here’s the thing – the Bible doesn’t say: “Submit to the authorities unless you think they might be making decisions based on faulty information.” The Bible doesn’t say: “Submit to the authorities unless you disagree with their recommended protocols and restrictions.” It just says:

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. (Romans 13:1 ESV)

So to state the obvious – disagreeing with the government rational – or disagreeing on the science that the government is using to make its decisions and protocols – does not get us to the exception clause in Acts 5:27-32. It does not. You might want it to – you might know someone who thinks it does – but it does not.

So – what would get us there?

First of all, a decision like that would have to be made by the entire board of elected elders – and they may even feel like we would want to bring that to the entire membership before we took such a drastic act – and so to be clear – you should not be making this sort of decision on your own. But in terms of general principles applied theoretically to our contemporary scenario, then I would imagine that we would only contemplate such a drastic measure if it was manifestly evident that the government restrictions were specifically and maliciously targeting the church in comparison to other organizations and businesses - but that clearly isn’t the case.

If anything, in Ontario, the church has been treated preferentially. Movie theatres and concert halls are still limited to 50 people per room. We have 220 people in this room alone. There isn’t a concert hall or a movie theatre in this Province that is enjoying the freedoms and the privileges that we are enjoying here this morning.

So this is not malicious, this is not unfair, this is just Romans 13. This is a lawful government doing what it thinks is right in the interests of public health and safety - thanks be to God!

Now before we close, I just want to take a second and remind ourselves of the example of Jesus.

The Example Of Jesus:

We're Jesus people here right? We're not conservatives or liberals. We're not Canadians or Americans – we're Jesus people. So let's take a look at how Jesus dealt with his civil authorities. Let me draw your attention to Luke 23:33-34. The Bible says:

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:33–34 ESV)

Talk about making BAD DECISIONS on the basis of FALSE INFORMATION. Jesus' trial was a sham! It was ALL FAKE NEWS! Everything they said about him was PROPAGANDA, DECEIPT and CONSPIRACY! If ever anyone had the right to angry, violent protest – it was Jesus! But instead, what do we see him doing?

We see him praying for the people who were so caught up in a fallen and corrupt system that they didn't even know what they were doing. We see him entrusting his soul to a faithful Judge and resting confidently in a soon and certain resurrection.

That's the Jesus way.

Therefore, brothers and sisters:

“let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” (1 Peter 4:15–16 ESV)

Let me pray for us.