

SHOULD CHRISTIANS OBEY THE LAW?, ROMANS 13:1-7

Pax Romana #30

Intro: It's a cold winter's day in Holland, 1944. The Germans have occupied your town for months now. Everywhere you go there are soldiers with guns. They come in your house when they want to, take your paintings off the wall if they like them. They eat your food. They've also been systematically killing everyone with Jewish heritage. You are hiding a few Jews in your attic right now, and Nazi officers are banging on your door. "Do you have any Jews here?" they demand. What do you say? What do you do?

These questions have always troubled Christians. Deborah Horn, in Today's Christian Woman writes, "One Sunday morning, while I was brushing my 9-year-old daughter's hair, she peppered me with questions. I was doing my best to answer them when she looked up and asked, "Are we Christians, democrats, or Republicans?" Lots of questions. Are we to submit to all governments? Even bad ones? Do we obey all laws, even ones we don't agree with? Is there a time when we do not? Can we claim that God is our ruler and no one else can judge me? God's people have been asking these things as long as there have been God's people on a fallen earth. What can we know? Some things are clear in Scripture. One is that...

1. Jesus is king of kings, the good ones, and the bad ones. That every knee will bow to Jesus regardless of their upbringing, or their nationality, or the religion of their parents. Everyone is under Christ's authority. He said it in the Great Commission, re-

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member? "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." **Christians obey the laws of men because all human authority is under Christ.** Paul asserts in verse 1 that Jesus is Lord and God over everyone and everything. Over every land, and every nation. That no one even makes it on to a police force somewhere unless Jesus should will it so. No one becomes a king or gets into office apart from the will of God. Not that the will of God is easy to understand, however. Still we take it on faith that he knows more than we do. Lets ponder it a bit. So how is a follower of Jesus supposed to treat authority?

Abraham was promised the land of Canaan by no one less than God himself, but he didn't get it in his life-time. Meanwhile he honored the Kings that were there and paid for any properties he acquired.

Daniel and his friends were carted off to Babylon, where they were in the service of a pagan king and actually oversaw his people for him. Even though it remained true as King Nebuchadnezzar discovered...

"All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"" Daniel 4:35, NIV.

In Jeremiah 27:6 God says, "Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant."

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He calls him a servant, the same term for the king that we find in Romans 13:4 ("he is the servant of God").

The prophet Ezra tells us that God called the pagan king, Cyrus of Persia, to be his servant to help Israel rebuild.

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah." Ezra 1:1, 2, NIV.

And finally, Jesus standing before Pilate who would hand him over to be crucified said to him "You have no power over me except that which is given you from above." (Jn.19:10).

So part of what we learn here is yes, we do submit to good and bad powers. Why? Because we submit to God, and he is sovereign over both good and bad powers. They serve in his world at his pleasure whether they know him or not. We, like them, also serve in this world at his pleasure. We like them, serve God's purposes. *Because of our world-view, Christians ought to thank police officers when they get a ticket!* And, as we saw in Romans 12, we do not overcome even evil with evil, but with good. So we are law-keepers. We do not riot in the streets or burn cars when we are upset. Paul is giving us a practical application of Romans 12 in Romans 13. I like what one writer said about this chapter. "This text has implications for war and peace, dictators and totalitarianism, concentration camps and gulags, revolts and revolu-

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tions, laws and law enforcement, political activism and civil disobedience, elections and lobbying, voting and paying taxes, speed limits and seat belts, stop signs and baby seats. This is not a small text. It is one of those mountain peaks of the book of Romans that makes a reader dizzy with implications.” -Piper.

Here’s another one of those implications:

2. Christians consider Christ king over all spheres of life, and at work in all spheres of life. Therefore we are determined to live as unto him in all spheres of life.

A. In God’s sovereignty over foreign rulers we are reminded of his sovereignty over every square inch of created reality. Many folks assume that Jesus has nothing to do with the world outside an hour on a Sunday morning, or when you feel like praying because things have gone quite wrong. This is a mistake. Bible readers have long recognized that God’s hand is at work in all things. We call this common grace. God sends the rain and the sun on the good and the bad.

But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust, too. (Matthew 5:44,45, NLT)

That’s the same point he’s making in verse 3.

(“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.”

Romans 13:3, 4, NIV.)

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Rulers fight wrong and promote right. They too are part of God's common grace in the world. Can you imagine the **chaos** if there was no law? Operating a vehicle on the road would be next to impossible. You couldn't know what the other guy might do unless there are rules. Operating a store would be too dangerous. Making financial investments would be severely more questionable. Without law and order our days would be more like the Old West where you could easily not depend on living through the day if not for a law man who could curb evil, or the Middle Ages where laws vacillated with the strongest fighter in the area. What if there was no 911, or EMTs, or firemen, or police officers? You've seen on the news what happens when natural disasters prevent authorities from getting to certain places, or when the power goes out across a city. Without law and authority, each man does as he pleases, people hurt and loot, and no one is safe.

If then Jesus is lord over all and commonly gives grace throughout the world, it follows that you and I are to follow him in all parts of the world and life; when the lights are on, and when they are off. That is, Jesus is not just someone you sing to once a week. But we must obey him in our marriages. Our behavior must reflect him on the ball field or basketball court, and the roadways as well. We must use good to overcome evil on our television sets and in the books we read, and language we use. We are out to overcome evil with good at work, even with a bad boss. Remember, Jesus' words imply that your boss is not your

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boss apart from the will of God himself! That's no small concept. That doesn't make it OK for your boss to be a poor boss, but it does mean you honor his or her authority for the sake and honor of Christ!

*"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves **for the Lord's sake** to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." 1 Peter 2:11-14, NIV.*

B. But what about authorities that hurt or even kill Christians? What about authorities in the Middle East that are beheading our Christian brothers and sisters? What about US courts that are restricting Christian businesses in the name of equality and forcing them to either affirm unbiblical views or pay fines? Aren't our times exceptions to the rule? I should remind us that Paul is writing around 55AD. In 50 AD Nero kicked all the Jews out of Rome, which likely included the Jewish sect called "Christians". The people Paul is writing to know what persecution is. According to the early historian Eusebius, starting around 64 AD Nero, would kill tens to hundreds of Christians in a given day; men, woman, and children. The executioners were said to have to switch places from exhaustion of dispatching so many one after another. For the first 300 years of Christianity, the Roman Em-

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emperors would strive to kill off the Christians systematically, but the more they killed them, the more the church grew. Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Valerian, Diocletian, Maximian -all of them persecuted Christians because while Rome was proud of being inclusive of any religion, they also required worship of the Emperor which only the Christians would not do. So they fed them to animals, used them as street torches, chopped them to pieces, poured molten lead over them. In fact Eusebius writes that judges tried to outdo one another in designing new forms of punishment and execution. Still, during virtually three centuries Christians were not known to have attacked their pagan enemies. These were people transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom.12), who would not conform to the world, and yet continued to submit to the authorities. (Rom. 13).

What had transformed them? They met and came to believe that the person of Jesus offered them eternal life and forgiveness of sins. They believed it when he said "He who believes in me will live even though he dies." No pagan god had ever risen from the dead. As just as Christ rose, so too the population of Christians rose. Historian and non-Christian Rodney Stark estimates at a 40% rate in the first 3 centuries. By 313AD when Christianity finally became legal in the Roman Empire, nearly 10% of it's 60 million population had become Christian.

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C. We see an interesting combination in the early Christian church that we are meant to emulate as well: a respectful submission to authority joined with a higher obedience to God. That leads us to something Paul doesn't make explicit, yet is in his writings... Part of following Christ's authority in all spheres of life, may sometimes call for disobedience to civil authority. This is hinted at at least two times in our text:

v3-4 Since the civil ruler is "*God's servant*" it clearly implies that they are obligated to promote God's moral order. This is even more explicit later.

v7 *give everyone what you owe him.* This reflects Jesus own words when asked if people should pay tax to Rome. (Matt.22) He said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's". Ie. Caesar is not God. Yes pay taxes. No don't worship anyone but God.

So the default position of a Christian is to submit to authority even when it means suffering. But when it come to obeying God vs men, we obey God. We see this also all through the history of followers of the True God.

1) In the Old Testament (Book of Daniel) Rack, Shack, and Benny, captives in Babylon would not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol. "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he

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does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”” Daniel 3:16-18, NIV.

2) In the New Testament (Acts 5:29) the ruling body, Sanhedrin, jailed the apostles, flogged them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus. They replied with these famous words.

“Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”” Acts 5:29-32, NIV.

This is a clear instance of this christian principle: we submit to authority unless it means disobeying God.

Conclusion: If we drew a continuum with “grudgingly” on one side and “cheerfully” on the other, where would you mark yourself on these things:

Paying taxes. [Consider what happened one spring evening at midnight in 1987: seven million American children suddenly disappeared. The worst kidnapping wave in history? Hardly. It was the night of April 15, and the Internal Revenue Service had just changed a rule. Instead of merely listing the name of each dependent child, tax filers were now required to provide a Social Security number. Suddenly, seven million children—children who had existed only as phantom exemptions on the previous year's 1040 forms—vanished, representing about one in ten of all dependent children in the United States.]

Owing revenue (shipping and handling? surcharges? Returning incorrect change?)

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Giving respect to government leaders you disagree with.

Honoring someone in office, or position regardless of personal flaws.

And if you and I cannot be cheerful in these small things, how will we ever have the courage to lay down our right to live for the sake of following Jesus? Our gratitude to Christ is paid out in our treatment of others.