

# Lesson 88: The Government and You (Romans 13:1-7)

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Imagine that you are a Christian farmer, living peacefully in colonial America, when word comes that a bunch of politicians in Philadelphia have declared independence from Great Britain. You are aware of what Paul teaches in [Romans 13](#) about being in submission to the governing authorities. What should you do? Which side should you take? What if General Washington later conscripts you to join his revolutionary army?

Or, you're living in Germany in the 1930's when Adolph Hitler came to power. You watch with growing horror as he begins systematically exterminating the Jews. Some of your Jewish neighbors, who were good friends, are herded off to the death camps, never to be seen alive again. Then you hear about a plot to assassinate Hitler and you're invited to join the conspiracy. If Hitler could be killed, it could conceivably save the lives of millions of Jews. But you're aware of [Romans 13](#), which commands you to be subject to the governing authorities. What should you do?

How should Christians relate to their government? If you think that I'm going to be able to give easy answers to these issues, thank you for your confidence in my wisdom, but I'm afraid that you're too optimistic! Hopefully, none of us will ever face dilemmas as difficult as the ones I've described. But [Romans 13:1-7](#) raises these and other important issues concerning our relationship as Christians with the government. When (if ever) is civil disobedience justifiable? What about armed rebellion or revolution against a corrupt government? What about capital punishment? Should Christians withhold part of their taxes to protest government misuse of our tax dollars?

At first glance, [Romans 13:1-7](#) may seem to be out of context. Paul shifts subjects with no transition or introduction. But in the context, Paul is speaking about how believers are to live in love and to get along peaceably with all people. He has just forbidden taking vengeance and advocated treating with kindness those who mistreat us. This raises the questions, "Is it wrong to report those who mistreat us to civil authorities for prosecution? Is it wrong to use force to resist an aggressor?" So Paul shows that it is proper for the government to protect law-abiding citizens and to punish evildoers.

Also, Paul was writing to Christians, some of whom were Jews, in the capital of the Roman Empire. Claudius, the previous emperor, had expelled the Jews from Rome a few years before because he viewed them as dangerous ([Acts 18:2](#)). The Jews hated being under Roman rule. The Romans often viewed Christians as a Jewish sect, so that suspicion of revolution was always a concern in the minds of the rulers. Also, Christians easily could have taken Jesus' teaching about the coming kingdom of God to mean that they should work for the overthrow of the secular, morally corrupt government in order to help bring in Christ's kingdom. In fact, when Paul wrote Romans, Nero, one of the most evil rulers of all time, was on the throne. What a time for a revolution!

So Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be clear on how they should relate to the civil government. In Paul's day, there was no Christian consensus or Christian-based constitutional law. There was no Jewish theocracy, as in the Old Testament. But these principles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, apply to believers down through the ages, living under various forms of government. Contrary to what many Americans may think, the Bible never mandates one type of government over another. While arguably a constitutional democracy with a balance of powers is the best form of government, the Bible does not ordain it or forbid monarchy or other forms of government. We can sum up [Romans 13:1-7](#):

Because God has ordained government authority for our good, we must be subject to our government.

This week, I'm going to work through these verses. Next week I hope to give an overview from all of Scripture on to what extent Christians and the church should be involved in politics.

First, I'll give a brief overview of Paul's flow of thought and then we'll explore four principles stemming from the text. First (13:1) Paul states that every person is to be subject to the governing authorities, because God is the sovereign

who ordains all human governments. Then (13:2) he draws the implication: If you resist government authority, which God has established, you are opposing God Himself and you'll come under judgment. Then (13:3-4) Paul explains that the purpose of civil government is to protect law-abiding citizens and punish law-breakers. As such, the government is acting as a minister of God in avenging wrong. Thus (13:5) there are two reasons to be in subjection to the government: Fear of punishment and conscience before God, who has ordained the government. Finally (13:6-7), Paul applies it by showing why we should pay taxes, namely, because government officials are servants of God. Thus they deserve our taxes as well as our respect.

## **1. The general principle: Since God has ordained government authority, we must be subject to it (13:1-2).**

Paul first lays down a general principle (13:1a), "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Then (13:1b) he explains the reason behind this principle: "For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." He follows this (13:2) with a logical conclusion: "Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves."

God has ordained various spheres of authority for the blessing and protection of those under authority: the government, the local church, the family, and employment. Due to sin, those in authority are often prone to misuse their authority for their own benefit, not for the benefit of those under their authority. But Paul, writing under wicked Nero, does not allow for exceptions. He states categorically (13:1b), "For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." Therefore every person is to be subject to their civil government.

Some do not want to go so far as to say that God established or ordained wicked tyrants like Nero. So they say that God ordained *the institution* of government, *not the individual rulers*. But that is a weak attempt to dodge a problem that Scripture repeatedly affirms. For example, Jeroboam, who rebelled against Solomon's son, Rehoboam, subsequently set up false gods and a false worship center so that his people would not go to Jerusalem. Yet his rebellion and kingdom was "a turn of events from the Lord," to establish His prophecy through Ahijah ([1 Kings 12:15](#)).

Nebuchadnezzar's army destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple, slaughtered many Jewish people, and carried most of the survivors to Babylon. But God calls him His "servant" and says that He gave all of the land he conquered into his hand ([Jer. 27:6](#)).

Pilate was a pagan Roman governor who allowed Jesus to be crucified. Note this interesting exchange between Pilate and Jesus ([John 19:10-11](#)): "So Pilate said to Him, 'You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the greater sin*.'"

Even the wicked dragon (Satan) and the beast (Antichrist) do not thwart God's purpose for the ages. They are under His sovereign authority, even when they persecute the saints ([Rev. 13](#)). Daniel's testimony to both Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar was consistent and clear: "The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes" ([Dan. 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21](#)).

When Paul says (13:2) that those who disobey government authority "will receive condemnation upon themselves," I understand him primarily to be referring to the judgment that the government brings on law-breakers. In verse 4 he says that the government "bears the sword," which refers to the authority to punish law-breakers. He also calls it "an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil." These expressions do not refer to God's eternal wrath, but to His temporal wrath inflicted by the government on evildoers so that it can uphold law and order.

Thus, because the government is God's minister to inflict punishment on those who do evil, Christians must be in subjection to the government. But this raises the questions, "What about civil disobedience against corrupt

governments or bad laws? What about armed rebellion against evil, tyrannical governments?"

Regarding civil disobedience, when the government commands us to do something that is disobedient to God's Word, we must resist the government and obey God. When the Sanhedrin commanded Peter and John to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, they replied ([Acts 4:19-20](#)), "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Later, when the command was repeated, Peter answered ([Acts 5:29](#)), "We must obey God rather than men." Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's idol ([Dan. 3](#)). In defiance of the king's edict, Daniel continued to pray ([Dan. 6](#)).

If the government forced us to abort babies to maintain population control, we should resist. If the government forbade us to gather as believers, we should gather anyway. If the government banned the Bible, we should own and distribute Bibles anyway. If the government commanded us not to say anything against homosexual behavior, we should teach what the Bible says anyway.

Should Christians ever take up arms against the government or attempt to assassinate a wicked ruler, such as Hitler? Were the thirteen colonies right to declare independence from Britain? These are difficult questions that must be prayerfully thought through in each situation. Godly believers differ in their conclusions.

While I would agree that it is wrong to murder an abortionist, which would be overcoming evil by evil ([Rom. 12:21](#)), I must admit that if I had lived in Nazi Germany and had had an opportunity to take out Hitler, it would have been very tempting. As you know, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and subsequently hanged because he was part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. Killing Hitler would have saved the lives of millions of Jews. I realize that by the same logic it could be argued that killing an abortionist saves hundreds of babies. So I'm being a bit inconsistent. But Hitler was so horrifically evil that, as I said, it would have been tempting to kill him.

Regarding revolution against the government, I agree with Sam Storms, who writes (on [EnjoyingGodMinistries.com](#)), "Armed revolution is justified ... only if the state has become totally opposed to the purpose for which God ordained it, and if there is no other recourse available to prevent massive evil." Obviously, this involves a judgment call. Some justify the American Revolution on the principle "*that it is morally right for a lower government official to protect the citizens in his care from a higher official who is committing crimes against these citizens*" (cited by Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* [Zondervan], p. 89, italics his). This view goes back to Calvin's *Institutes* (*ibid.*).

But in my judgment, I cannot justify the American Revolution on biblical grounds, although I am thankful for our nation and our freedoms. While King George was corrupt and repressive, I don't think he was so bad as to justify rebellion. Again, I realize that godly thinkers disagree on this. It's not an easy issue! But the general principle is clear and exceptions to it must be weighed very carefully: Since God has ordained government authority, we must be in subjection to it or we are in rebellion against God Himself.

## **2. The purpose for government is to protect law-abiding citizens and punish law-breakers (13:3-4).**

[Romans 13:3-4](#): "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil."

Paul is presenting the *general* purpose and practice of government: to protect those who do right and to punish those who do wrong. Granted, there have been many exceptions throughout history. Corrupt governments punish law-abiding citizens who speak out against the corruption and they reward scoundrels who help keep them in power. John Calvin argues (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 480) that God uses wicked rulers as His scourge to punish

the sins of the people. In other words, we get the rulers that we deserve! But when governments function as they are supposed to, they protect law-abiding citizens and punish law-breakers.

To do this, the government must legislate morality. You often hear that we should not legislate morality, but that is absurd. I had an exchange in the local newspaper earlier this year with an opinion piece where the author argued that imposing “personal, moralistic beliefs” challenges our freedom by disregarding the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. I pointed out in my response that we impose personal, moralistic beliefs all the time. We have laws against rape, wife-beating, honor killings, stealing, assault, murder, pedophilia, and many other immoral behaviors, and rightly so. We forcefully impose these “moralistic” beliefs on all in our society, even though they go against the personal beliefs of a minority.

The responses to my article were unbelievable. One man argued that “murder, rape, pedophilia, and assault are crimes, not bad morals.” Hello? Another lamented, “It is true that our laws are informed by our collective beliefs. Unfortunately, those beliefs are often derived from a jumble of ancient religious texts.” But he is hopeful, as he continues, “Fortunately, more and more people are discarding those antiquated religious beliefs in favor of a morality based on science and reason.” He goes on to state proudly that he is in favor of women being allowed to kill their babies (he calls it “pro-choice”) and that he chooses “science, reason and freedom.” What delusion! Sadly, that man used to attend this church!

If God’s purpose for civil governments is to protect law-abiding citizens and punish law-breakers, then it follows that we should use civil authorities for protection and due process. Paul himself did this in Philippi, where he was unjustly beaten and imprisoned without a trial, although he was a Roman citizen. When the authorities realized their error and wanted to quietly usher him out of town, Paul wouldn’t stand for it ([Acts 16:35-40](#)). He also invoked his Roman citizenship to avoid a scouring and to appeal to Caesar rather than face a kangaroo court ([Acts 22:25; 25:11](#)).

This means that if someone is physically or sexually abusing you, you should report it to the proper authorities. If your husband is physically abusive, call the police. If he is a church member, let the elders know so that we can implement church discipline. If you are being defrauded by a church member, first attempt to resolve the matter in the church ([1 Cor. 6:1-8](#)). If it can’t be resolved, you may have to take your case to secular courts. The purpose of government is to protect law-abiding people and punish evildoers.

What about capital punishment? Paul mentions the government “bearing the sword.” As far back as the covenant with Noah, God ordained that if someone deliberately takes another person’s life, his life should be taken ([Gen. 9:6](#)). Under the Mosaic covenant, there were many other crimes punishable by death. But those laws applied specifically to Israel under the law.

My understanding is that capital punishment is still fitting for first degree murder. It upholds the sanctity of human life to impose the penalty of life for life. But the way that our government practices capital punishment is inept. Murderers are allowed to live on death row for decades while they file appeal after appeal, often on technicalities. My view is that if a criminal is guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt, he should be executed immediately after his trial. [Ecclesiastes 8:11](#) states, “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.” To argue that a criminal should not be executed because he is insane is insane. To insist that we must execute him as painlessly as possible is insane. The issue is that he ruthlessly murdered innocent people. The punishment for that crime should be quick, painful death. Anything else cheapens the lives that he slaughtered.

The general principle is that since God has ordained government authority, we must be subject to it. The purpose for government is to protect law-abiding citizens and punish law-breakers.

**3. We should be subject to government not only because it is for our good, but also because it is right (13:5).**

[Romans 13:5](#): “Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake.” Paul means that we should be subject to our government not only because we fear punishment if we break the law, but also because we fear God, who knows our hearts. This makes keeping the laws of our land not just a matter of outward compliance, but also of inward obedience to God. With outward compliance, you are honest on your income tax forms because you’re afraid that if you aren’t, you might get caught. With inward obedience, you are honest because you want to have a clear conscience before God, who reads your tax forms before you send them in!

#### **4. Paying taxes and giving proper respect to government officials is part of submission (13:6-7).**

[Romans 13:6-7](#): “For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.”

For the third time Paul mentions that government officials are servants of God, but this time he uses a different word that is sometimes used for those who serve in the temple and also of angels ([Heb. 1:7](#)). This may hint that these officials are performing a sacred function, although that may be reading too much into the use of the word here (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 804). But by saying that they are “servants of God,” Paul wants us to see the importance of submitting to them, paying taxes, and giving them proper honor.

Paul uses two words for taxes. The first refers to direct taxes paid by subject nations, such as property tax and income tax. The second word refers to more indirect tax, such as sales tax and customs (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 686). The point is, although we often disagree with how our government spends our tax dollars, we should pay our taxes conscientiously before the Lord. We can protest our taxes through proper channels and we can vote for those who might lower our taxes, but we aren’t free to opt out of paying our taxes.

“Fear” should probably be translated “respect” here. In the context, Paul is not speaking about fearing God, but about the proper respect given to government leaders. We should confront the evil behavior of rulers. John the Baptist confronted Herod’s taking his brother’s wife ([Matt. 14:4](#)). Jesus called Herod “that fox” ([Luke 13:32](#)), which referred either to his deceptiveness or his destructiveness (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1247). Our current President promotes evil views on abortion and homosexuality. It is right to confront him on this. My understanding is that all civil authorities are worthy of *respect* because of their office. But *honor* is only due to those who deserve it because they are honorable in their personal integrity, morals, and in the way that they serve.

### **Conclusion**

Our text rests on the assumption that you are in subjection to God and want to please Him. Paul is not promoting moralism, but rather submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ. He is showing us how that submission plays out in our relationship to our government. So before you get right with the government, you’ve got to get right with God by repenting of your sins and trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Your relationship with Christ provides the basis for proper submission toward the government.

### **Application Questions**

1. On what biblical grounds would you argue in favor of or against the American Revolution?
2. Some argue that it is wrong for Christians to protest at abortion clinics or at civil rights marches. Others argue that it is wrong not to do these things. What is your view and why?
3. To what extent (if any) is it right to use satire, sarcasm, or ridicule toward government leaders in view of [Rom. 13:7](#)?

4. What Scriptures support capital punishment? Should any crimes other than murder be subject to the death penalty?

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