

Model Citizens
Romans 13:1-7
#63 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – April 1, 2007

Introduction

As we are studying Romans, we should see that Christian discipleship – following Christ – is very practical. Nowhere does the Bible encourage us to pack up and move to something resembling a perpetual Christian camp or retreat. Instead, we are to follow Christ in the real world, dealing with real people, handling real problems, feeling real pain, facing the same circumstances that everyone else around us faces. The difference, though, is that we are constantly asking how being a follower of Christ affects our responses and choices.

Romans 12-16 is – thinking broadly – about relationships. In the particular passage we'll look at today Paul writes about how Christians relate to their government. As we will see he does not exhaust the subject, but he gives us a foundation for us to understand how people who are at the same time citizens of heaven and citizens of this world are to relate to the civil authorities around us.

Read Romans 13:1-7.

Christians and Government: Living as Model Citizens

1. Why is this subject discussed at this point?

In some ways it seem as if this topic comes out of nowhere. Was there something going on that made Paul feel that this was a potential problem?

History tells us a few things that will help us. First, Act 18:1-2 tells us that the Emperor Claudius had ordered the Jews in Rome to leave, and this may have been the result of some turmoil in the Jewish community over Christ. It is also possible that Christians who were being taught allegiance to God's kingdom took this to mean that they could reject human government. We're not sure. What we are sure about is that in the 50's AD there was a great deal of dissatisfaction about taxes, and apparently this led to a tax revolt in 58 AD.¹ Possibly Paul was addressing that issue.

Whether or not this was behind what Paul wrote we don't know. What is clear, though, is that in a section where Paul is talking about getting along with people and living responsibly, he would naturally be concerned that the Roman Christians live as good citizens, so he provides them with some clear instruction about what good citizenship looks like.

¹ Moo, NIVAC, p. 426 quoting Tacitus.

2. Exactly what does Paul say?

There are two major points that Paul makes in this passage:

First, he tells us in verses 1-5 that every person is expected to be subject (be submissive) to the governing authorities. He gives two reasons:

- Reason #1 – God has instituted all civil authority (1-2a).

This is something that Scripture affirms in several places. See Isaiah 40:21-24; Daniel 4:17; Proverbs 21:1; John 19:11.

Furthermore, because of the fact that it is God who sets leaders in their places of power, resisting authority will incur judgment (2b).

- Reason #2 – Rulers are God’s ministers to maintain order and punish those who do wrong (2b-4).

He tells his readers, if you don’t want to fear authority, do what is right. Let me illustrate this. Have you ever been driving down a highway at a faster speed than the law allowed? And suddenly you see a police car hidden behind some bushes to the side of the road? A radar trap! What is your first reaction? For many of us there is a slight surge of adrenaline that is accompanied by the thought, “Oh no – I hope I’m not going to get caught.” Sometimes that is amplified when you see the patrol car pull out and turn its lights on, and only when he passes you and pulls someone else over do you feel a sense of relief. Do you want to avoid that fear? Then stay within the speed limit. And that is true of any authority: there is no need to fear people in authority – your teacher, your boss, the police, the IRS, whoever – if you do what is right.

Then he makes it clear that if people do resist authority, that authority has the power to judge – even to the taking of life.

- Verse 5 summarizes and applies verses 1-4. We submit to authority to avoid God’s wrath. (If you follow Paul’s argument, any punishment that comes from an authority because of our wrong-doing is ultimately punishment that comes from God.) He also reminds us that as Christians, there is a conscience component. We need to maintain a clear conscience. It is interesting to see how that is an important quality in the New Testament. We need to echo the desire of the writer of Hebrews, who said (13:18): “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.” Paul also spoke of this in Acts 24:16 when he said, “So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.”

So this is the first point he makes – we need to be submissive to authority because God has ordained it.

The second point in this section is that because God has called us to be subject to government, we need to fulfill some obligations of citizenship. He identifies two levels of obligation:

- We have an obligation to pay taxes and revenues (tolls, for example).
- We have an obligation to give respect and honor to those who are in authority.

Let's talk about these things for a moment. Some years ago a friend of ours in New Jersey got wind of a loophole in the tax laws whereby it was possible to register your family as a church. He was the pastor, his family was the congregation, his house was the church. So he filed the appropriate paperwork and began enjoying his new tax-exempt status. Or at least he tried to. With both Christians and non-Christians who knew about this, his reputation took a major hit. Thankfully he renounced this and to my knowledge pays his taxes like everyone else does.

Let's talk about respect and honor. Making fun of, or speaking disparaging about, people in authority is hardly a new thing. You ought to read some of the editorials and see some of the political cartoons from the Civil War era. Abraham Lincoln, whom we regard as one of our best, was vilified in the press.

How do Christians relate to people who are in places of authority? Well, if they are not in our party, we roast them. People have sent me email jokes about Hillary Clinton that are identical to jokes about Al Gore that circulated years ago. Just the names have changed.

We live in a society in which we are free to voice our dissent or approval of those who are in places of authority. And there is nothing here in this text that says that we have to like the views and policies of those who rule. BUT, as is true of every other area of life, being a follower of Christ ought to govern what we say about those whom God has placed in authority. And I wonder if – just if – Mrs. Clinton is elected President in 2008 – if evangelicals will be as offensive and abusive as they were when her husband was in office? And before you start saying “Well Peter . . . liberals . . . abortion . . . taxes . . . morals” ask yourself what Jesus would do? You might say, “Well, Jesus called Herod ‘that fox’ (Luke 13:32),” remember that Herod will give an account to Jesus. And so will you.

I am not saying that we need to be silent. I am saying that we need to be respectful. In fact, I'm not saying it, God's word is.

How Does This Passage Relate to Us?

1. “But what about . . . ?”

Here is what I've observed from years of teaching:

- If we teach that children should obey their parents in all things, someone will ask, “But what about when . . .” and go on to ask about when parents want children to do what is wrong.
- If we teach that wives should submit to their husbands, it is not long before the question comes up, “But what if my husband is telling me to do something wrong?”
- And if we teach about submission to government, it is not long before someone will say, “But what about Christians who live under a government that does wrong?”

Those are good questions and right questions to ask unless we are trying to circumvent what God tells us to do.

We need to understand first of all that this passage is not intended to be exhaustive. Author John Stott wrote: “. . . *in depicting the rulers in such a good light, as commending the right and opposing the wrong, he is stating the divine ideal, not the human reality.*”²

Similarly Dr. Tom Schreiner writes,

*This text is misunderstood if it is taken out of context and used as an absolute word so that Christians uncritically comply with the state no matter what is being demanded. What we have here is a general exhortation that delineates what is usually the case: people should normally obey ruling authorities.*³

Are there times when Christians disobey government? From Exodus (Moses’ parents) to Daniel to the Apostles (Acts) we have a record of people who refused to obey rulers and officials. But that only happened when the dictates of government went against the clearly revealed command of God. And when those points of resistance took place, those who resisted were willing to pay the consequences of their choices.

There is another part of this “what about” question. Did God raise up men like Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin? The short answer – all we have time for – is yes he did, and he did it to accomplish his purposes. I wish I had more time to talk about that, but I do not. Yet if you read through the Old Testament you will see several examples of how God sovereignly used even the wickedest of rulers to accomplish some redemptive purpose.

2. The point of Paul’s instructions might be best summarized in this: Christians are to be model citizens. In our culture that means we should be law-abiding. We should pay taxes. We should speak respectfully about those in authority, and we should vote. If you are not voting, I believe you will give an account of that irresponsibility on the day of judgment.

² Stott: The Message of Romans, page 341.

³ Schreiner: ECNT- Romans, page 687.

Someday every knee will bow and acknowledge the supreme authority and rule of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:9-11). That will either be in the form of a grateful servant or of a condemned man or woman awaiting judgment.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a call for people to acknowledge and repent of their sin and turn to Christ in faith for forgiveness. It is not a suggestion, not an invitation. It is a command. Have you submitted yourself to God's authority? If not, I appeal to you to turn today to Christ and be saved.