

Romans 13:1-7
(Jeremiah 29:4-7; Mark 12:13-17)
“A Call to Obedience”

Introduction

We are all born into an earthly kingdom, a particular country and nation. As Christians, we believe that we have been born-again into a heavenly Kingdom. What is the relationship between the two? If the Bible tells us that “here we have no continuing city,” and if we consider ourselves “strangers and sojourners” here, then how are we to respond to the claims of the earthly kingdom, the nation in which we live, and which calls us to participate in its political process, to serve in its military and to support it by paying our taxes?

Some Christians withdraw as far as possible from involvement in the affairs of this world, seeing it as a sinking ship from which one must escape. Others seek to use the machinery of government and the power of the state to enforce their beliefs, hoping to gain control of the ship and sail it into a heavenly port. What, if anything, does the Bible say about such things?

Toward the end of Romans 12, Paul warned us not to repay evil for evil, but to leave judgment to God whose wrath toward evil ensures that he will deal with it in due course. But the question naturally arises, Do we have to wait until the consummation of human history and the last judgment for wickedness to be judged?

Paul’s answer is No. God has ordained that humans organize themselves into nations with governments of laws that reward those who do what is good and punish those who do evil. Governments are led by “governing authorities,” whose chief task is to reward the good and punish the wicked. Therefore, Paul writes that we are to “be subject to the governing authorities.” In other words, we are to obey them, to respect them, to pay our taxes and be good citizens.

But that raises important questions: What if the government is unjust or the officials are wicked? What if I am asked to do things that violate my conscience? Is there any limit to the authority of the government? There are two equal and opposite dangers here: One is of dismissing Paul’s words whenever we don’t respect our leaders. We must remember that when Paul was writing, there were no Christians in government, and the power of Rome was often used against the church. In the end, Paul and Peter were both executed by Rome. So the call to obedience is significant for us even when we are unhappy with our government or our leaders.

The other danger arises when we use this call to obedience as an excuse to obey government even when it involves us in wickedness, as many German Christians did under Nazism and many southern Christians did under segregation. So where is the biblical balance? Let’s listen to God’s Word.

Body

1. First, Paul addresses both the authority and the purpose of human government (13:1-4).

- Human government derives its authority from God (13:1-2).
- Human government is to reward those who do right and punish those who do wrong (13:3-4).
- Therefore, those who serve in government may be considered both “servants of God” and “ministers of God” (13:4&6).

2. Secondly, Paul addresses our responsibility to those in authority over us (13:5-7).

- We are to obey them (13:5).
- We are to support them by paying our taxes (13:6).
- We are to honor and respect them (13:7).

3. Thirdly, in the light of history we must ask whether there are biblical limits to our obedience to those in authority over us (13:7).

- If obedience to authorities involves disobedience to God, we must obey God and disobey the governing authorities. The words of Jesus and the example of the apostles set the boundaries: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17), and “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

4. Finally, that being the case, we should also ask what are biblically appropriate, gospel-driven ways of refusing obedience to human authority when obedience would involve disobedience to God?

- Legal Appeal (E.g., Paul’s appeal to authorities and, finally, to Caesar).
- Civil Disobedience/Protest (E.g., Peter and John’s preaching).
- Flight (E.g., both Jesus and Paul’s examples).
- Force (*Not* violence – Requires establishment of a new government).

Conclusion

We must realize that, while the tasks of civil government and of the church are different, they are complementary. God wants both to have in view the redemption of humanity, as government creates a place of freedom, where justice, goodness and

beauty can flourish, and where people are free to seek the Lord, hear the gospel and respond to its transforming power to make all things new.

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