

Does Romans 13 Tell Us to Obey Every Government

Romans 13:1-10 addresses our responsibility to the authority of human government and to the law of God. Unfortunately, many Christians use this passage to cave in to anything the government tells them to do. They become like sheep (also known as "sheeple") headed for the slaughter. I think this is very dangerous behavior.

In the United States and Canada the government works for us -- not the other way around. Absolutely, we need to pay our taxes and adhere to the laws of the land in order to maintain civil peace and an orderly society. But, when the government oversteps it's bounds, I believe we, as Christians and people who live in a republic, have the obligation to act against abuses of power. This is becoming increasingly important as our rights and freedoms are being systematically stripped from us.

*Rushdoony's commentary on Romans 13:1-5 in his book *Romans & Galatians*, Chapter 52 - *The State and God*, pgs. 245-249 is so important on this subject. I have paraphrased and copied some notes out of that chapter that were especially helpful to me.*

Rom. 13:1-5 are some of the more controversial portions of Paul's letter and these verses have often been used to require an abject subservience to the state. This should not surprise us.

People have used the Bible to vindicate homosexuality despite its plain statements. Why not statism as well? Paul, however, speaks out plainly and bluntly, and, by placing every civil gov. under the triune God, he radically altered the nature of politics.

The terror or fear required in vs. 3 is a religious one, God-centered, because it is God's order and God's restraint on sin that is at stake. This terror is thus with respect to God and His law order, not man's. Hence, this terror must be aroused in evil-doers, not the godly.

Paul not only places civil gov. under God, but he implicitly and surely requires that civil gov. comply with God's law. This is clear from Paul's references to civil gov: it is 'ordained of God,' as are all things, and, like everything else in the universe, must serve God. This same verse 1 also requires everyone to be 'subject unto the higher powers.' Both words, ordained and subject, have reference to a God-established order, and both every man and every ruler are placed under that order with a duty to comply to it. 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29) applies equally to the subject and the ruler, to the state and to the citizen. There are no exemptions from God's law.

In v. 2, Paul deals with resistance to authority. If we set ourselves in array against authority, we incur judgement. The word 'resisteth' implies an across-the-board radical defiance of authority, not a moral stand on a particular point. Man's law must be rooted in God's laws. A gov. that defies the laws of God is heading for disaster. Paul is not requiring an unquestioning submission to all authority. Rather, he is saying that we cannot without sin challenge the fact of authority in any sphere, family, church, state, or elsewhere. He is generalizing, although civil gov is clearly in mind.

The Christian's relationship to civil gov. was a problem for the early church, as it should be today also. The fundamental confession of the early church was 'Jesus is Lord' or Sovereign

(Phi. 2:9-11). This, however, ran counter to the claim of Rome that Caesar was lord or sovereign. Paul answers the question, can we obey Caesar, who claims to be our lord” Paul’s answer is that Caesar is the ‘minister of God,’ i.e., servant. We obey Caesar as God’s servant, not as a sovereign.

Paul tells us that every kind of authority and every civil gov. lives in God’s world under God’s gov. Our perspective is badly warped if we forget this. This universe will cast into outer darkness, into hell, all who by-pass God’s law for their own. In Rev. 13:9-10, we are told: “If any man have an ear, let him hear. He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.” The word sword is the Roman symbol of state power. We are thus told that when the state abuses God’s law and enslaves people unjustly, or kills them without cause, God will enslave and kill that state. This confidence in the wrath (vengeance) of God ‘is the patience and the faith of the saints.’

‘There is no power but of God.’ Since He made all things, all things and the conditions of their lives are God-imposed and inescapable. Paul tells us twice in vs. 1 that God has ordained all governments in every sphere, he does not mean thereby that every sphere can be a law unto itself. Clearly, the implication is that every sphere of life and authority is under God and His law. Paul gives us no doctrine of passive obedience. The comments of Hodge are very telling here: “All authority is of God. No man has any rightful power over other men, which is not derived from God. All human power is delegated and ministerial. This is true of parents, of magistrates, and of church officers... The extent of this obedience is to be determined from the nature of the case. When Paul commands wives to obey their husbands, they are required to obey them as husbands, not as masters, nor as kings; children are to obey their parents as parents, not as sovereigns; and so in every other case. This passage, therefore, affords a very slight foundation for the doctrine of passive obedience.”

In vv. 3-4, Paul defines the state. 1) The state is not a god but God’s servant. 2) As God’s servant, it must be a terror to evil, “a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” Since in Rom. 12:19 Paul tells us that vengeance belongs to god, it can only be exercised by the state under God, by delegation, according to God’s law. Since God’s vengeance has reference to God’s law, no state has the freedom to create its own law and use coercion to enforce it. 3) If we do good, we should have ‘praise’ from the civil gov, and ‘good’ in the form of godly order. When civil gov. ceases to be God’s minister it becomes God’s wrath to others and to itself. It becomes a terror to the godly, and the protection of evil men, as our courts are becoming now.

Obedience is grounded (v. 5) in conscience (knowing oneself before God) and in the confidence in God’s wrath of which Paul speaks (God’s vengeance and judgment). It is not servile obedience but a regenerative obedience. It obeys within the limits of God’s law and it works to reconstruct the entire social order by obedience to God.

A society and its various areas of gov. reflect the nature and character of men. A society made up of evil and reprobate men will reflect their character. The essence of non-Biblical politics is to try to take sinful, fallen men and to create a just social order. This is the purpose of revolutions in the modern era. We can, in more than a few cases, say that the old regimes overthrown by revolutions were bad, but we must add that the new ones have been far, far worse. If we apply systematically the premise that man without Christ can create a just social order we thereby enthrone evil as the means to good.