

PART SEVEN
GOVERNMENT
& POLITICS



STEWARDSHIP
MAXIMIZING GOD'S BLESSINGS FOR HIS GLORY
& OUR BENEFIT

This email represent the kinds of discussions I had over the past week on the topic of Romans 13.

“We had an interesting discussion today over dinner. I had read the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer we were discussing whether or not Bonhoeffer was disobeying Romans 13 in participating in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.”

And of course they wanted me to pontificate and hand down the correct answer. Actually, they were just curious what I thought. And I hope that I never pontificate in the more literal sense! Now the question about Bonhoeffer is somewhat theoretical but still an awesome question to get one thinking deeply about this topic. Hopefully, you and I will never be faced with such a difficult question in real life but we do need to grapple with this text and its application to questions such as these.

- Why should I pay taxes (and how should I feel about it!)?
- What should be my attitude toward a politician with whom I strongly disagree?
- What does submission to local, state and federal governing authorities look like?
- Under what conditions is it acceptable to practice civil disobedience?
- How involved should I be in politics?
- Am I truly grateful for the benefits of governing authorities that God has given to us?

Before we proceed, let's read the passage once again.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an

avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

1. God appoints the governing authorities-all of them.

This is the foundational principle that we established last week. There is no room for declaring one government to be legitimate and another to be illegitimate. There are no caveats or escape clauses to this principle. *For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*

2. Resisting the governing authorities is the same as resisting God.

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. As I said last week, this is the verse that really tends to bother us. If all resistance is the same things as resisting God, then that would eliminate any chance of civil disobedience. Once again, verses like Acts 5:29 have to be paired with Romans 13. "We must obey God rather than men." However, just as we must first fully recognize that every governing authority is ordained by God before we can think about disobeying these authorities in the same way we must recognize that resisting authorities is the same as resisting God before we can decide to resist them. All that is to say that Acts 5:29 is valid and absolutely necessary but also not common.

So the vast majority of the time, when you disobey a law of man you are also disobeying God. This is often very easy to see. If you steal and murder, we know that stealing and murder are both illegal and also Biblically forbidden. So it's easy to see that they are one and the same. But when it comes to things like obeying the speed limit, it's not always quite so clear. I realize that most of us probably go 3-5 miles over the speed limit most of the time. I'm not talking about that. I was stopped in Madison for speeding on the way home from Pittsburgh. I experienced that sinking feeling when you realize that the cop with his blaring lights doesn't want to pass you but rather pulls in behind you. I had driven all day long and had just turned off from Interstate 39 onto Hwy 14. There wasn't much traffic and I was dead tired and failed to adjust my speed. The highway patrolman was justified in pulling me over. I was disobeying the laws of the land. Thankfully since I had a clean record, he was also gracious and just gave me a warning.

But a law like the speed limit is meant to be obeyed. If you find yourself with more than one speeding ticket every ten years, then that is a form of rebellion against God. This is why taxes are on Paul's list. I talked to someone last Sunday who knows Christians who refuse to pay their taxes. We'll talk about that one more in a little while but the fact is that the vast majority of the time, laws are created for our good and are meant to be obeyed. "I know right about now many of you are thinking, "But what about...?" Our minds-sometimes you could say our rebellious minds-immediately think of the exceptions. Just like the fifth question of the Heidelberg catechism states: "I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor." And that's what most laws are all about. Most laws are a matter of respecting and loving your neighbor. Again, killing and stealing are the obvious ones but so is littering, and speeding and zoning laws. Chickens are

allowed within the city limits of Viroqua but cattle are not. There's good reason for that. So before you jump to the exceptions, first work on not resisting the governing authorities.

3. They are God's servants and ministers of God.

This truth is stated three times in this passage. Remember that God called Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" and Cyrus "my shepherd"? Elected officials are commonly referred to as "public servants" but in reality they are also God's servants and shepherds. It's crazy when you think about an elected official who on the one hand actively opposes God in his or her personal life and in every aspect of their public service. Yet at the same time, each one is God's servant. This truth illustrates Proverbs 21:1. *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*

4. They have a moral compass which leads them to punish evil.

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good.

If you have spent any time in a police station or a courtroom you know that by and large, the governing authorities work to prosecute criminal activity. This past year the police shut down two meth houses in Vernon County. Eight children were living in those two homes. I think we all understand that such activity needs to be punished. So people like that are always thinking about getting caught. To people like this Paul wrote *Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good.* God intends for the governing authorities to be for our good.

One encouraging sign is the Wisconsin legislature's pro-life bill. Here's the author of the bill commenting on it.

"Simply put, the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act will preserve and protect Wisconsin's innocent, unborn babies who can feel pain. The call to preserve precious, human life transcends party lines. Thus, I hope to see bi-partisan support for this vital measure to protect Wisconsin's unborn from needless pain and suffering."¹

Scott Walker also chimed in. "In my past four years as governor, we have made substantial progress in the fight for our pro-life values in Wisconsin. We defunded Planned Parenthood. We prohibited abortion from being covered by health plans in a health exchange. We passed legislation assuring the women and their unborn child are better protected under law – through placing stringent requirements on medical professionals and requiring the provision of thorough and vital information to the mother."

Obviously we can think of countless ways in which the governing authorities do not have a moral compass and are presumably not working for our good. But this is the way that God set t up and sometimes we need to sit back and count our blessings instead of only seeing the bad.

5. They restrain anarchy and provide order.

When governments rule well, anarchy is restrained and civil order is maintained. Last Sunday improperly applied the word anarchy to ISIS. ISIS is the opposite of anarchy in the sense that they have countless strict rules by which they govern. I was thinking of anarchy in the sense of chaos. Without rules there is nothing but chaos. Communist government restrain chaos through oppression. It is its own form of civil order but it is an evil form of civil order. But God's intention is that decent laws will restrain anarchy and provide the necessary order that all societies need.

6. They carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. The "sword" is almost certainly referring to capital punishment but by extension, it can apply to all forms of punishment.

Punishment, when justly carried forth, is the wrath of God. God's work of wrath is performed through the judgment of governing authorities. This is not final wrath, like at the last judgment, but temporary wrath. Nevertheless, it is God's wrath.

On relevant question is whether or not capital punishment is acceptable. There is no question that the Bible supports the death penalty. The key text is Genesis 9.

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image (Genesis 9:5-6)

Here's my quick and dirty take on the death penalty. As I said, the Bible supports the idea. It is justified in that sense. But there has been such sloppy, unjust application of the death penalty that I can't support it. When you end up sending dozens of people to death row and to the execution chamber who did not deserve to be there, the law is horribly broken. So my conclusion is that I support the death penalty in theory though not in practice.

There is an application to parenting in here. I don't mean the execution of your children, in case you are getting any ideas. ;-) The application to parenting is the administration of punishment and justice. Good parenting lays down rules and "laws" of sorts and then good parenting follows through with administering rewards and punishments for obedience and disobedience.

7. They prevent us from taking vengeance.

To understand this principle you need to see the larger context of this passage from chapter twelve.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:17-19)

Do you see the same key words repeated in both passages? They both talk about vengeance and God's wrath. As an individual, taking vengeance on another person is utterly sinful. However, it is our natural tendency. We get angry, we become bitter and left unchecked, we can become vengeful. In reality, bitterness is a form of vengeance just as anger is a form of murder of the heart. When you are bitter toward someone, even if you never commit a vengeful act, you wish that you could. If you were not restrained by law, by morality and by conscience, most of us would literally take vengeance on others. But in your heart, bitterness is your private vengeance.

So God commands us to not take vengeance on others but "leave it to the wrath of God." And who is it that carries out the wrath of God? Governing authorities do. *For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.* You see, it is completely wrong for an individual to take vengeance on another person but it is completely right for the governing authorities to do so. The authorities are an avenger, which is the one who carries out vengeance.

Now you must remove any negative emotions from this idea of the government as an avenger. Vengeance usually does bring malice and hatred along with it. Vengeance is often not even equal, is it? If you offend me I am likely to "get you back" in a way that was worse than what you did to me. But here, vengeance is not meant to carry those negative emotions with it. You can see why this is true with the verse from chapter 12. *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* God is not malicious and hateful when he carries out his vengeance. God's vengeance is pure justice. In theory, the vengeance by the governing authorities is also meant to be as purely just as possible. In practice, we know that this is not true, but it is still God's intention that it be so.

8. They help us to love our enemies (and our neighbors).

There are two ways in which the governing authorities help us to love our enemies. The first is that when we follow God's instruction, we will not carry out vengeance on our enemies. We can rely on the governing authorities to do this instead. Ultimately we can trust God to do justice, as chapter 12 states, but the governing authorities also share that role on earth.

The second way that the authorities help us to our enemies and our neighbors is what I mentioned before. Good and just laws restrain us from doing evil. Even something as simple as speeding not only puts you, the driver at risk, but it also puts your passengers and other drivers on the road at an increased risk. So obeying the speed limit is a form of loving your neighbor.

On Friday we visited Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago and was given a tour by this man, Anthony Welch. Anthony has been in and out of prison eight times in his short life. Before he started at PGM, Anthony had never read a Bible in his life. It was so encouraging to hear how the Lord saved him and is transforming his life. One thing he pointed out was that he not only regretted the ways he had harmed himself



but also how he has hurt so many other people. He wants desperately to make his mom proud so he knows that he has hurt her more than anyone else. Some people like to say that some crimes are victimless crimes, that you are only hurting yourself, but that is never the case. One true benefit of laws is that they help us to love both enemy and neighbor alike.

9. They help our conscience.

Verse five reads: *5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.* Here is a most terrifying thought. What if all laws were removed and God's laws and presence were removed. What kinds of evil do you think you might be capable of? That's a scary thought, don't you think? We would have very little to guide our conscience and we would be capable of almost anything. God's laws retrain evil and man's laws—as they are ordained by God himself—have the same purpose. They both speak to your conscience and remind you what is right and what is wrong.

10. They provide services through taxation.

For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed.

As I said, last Sunday I spoke with someone who has a friend who doesn't pay any income taxes. They are quite concerned that they will get into huge trouble. Dave Hart told me a story about a guy he knew who did get caught for tax evasion. Somehow he did not end up in prison but he was in big trouble. Some years later Dave ran into him again and was glad to see that the man was truly changed. He was very contrite about his actions. By getting caught, his conscience was pricked and he vowed never to make the same mistake again.

This reminds us that sometimes the best thing that can happen to someone is that they get caught. You are probably aware of the sad story of Preston Nelson who was tragically killed in a car accident in April. They were traveling at extremely high rates of speed when they missed a curve. This was probably not the first time they engaged in this kind of dangerous activity. What might have happened if they had been caught earlier? Maybe this tragedy could have been prevented. I realize that many people continue to commit the same crimes even after they are caught but often having the law in your face and facing severe consequences is a wake-up call.

Back to the subject of taxes. By themselves, taxes are not evil. They are a God-ordained means to provide the society. It's wise to avoid taxes as much as possible and you can certainly vote for politicians who will lower taxes, but it is always wrong to evade taxes.

11. For all of these reasons, they deserve our respect.

This passage ends with respect. *Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.* Governing authorities deserve a level of honor whether they themselves are honorable. They deserve respect whether or not they are respectable.

Anthony from Pacific Garden Mission has had trouble submitting to authorities his entire life, which has been at the core of many of his problems. I asked him how his mentors balance love and discipline with him. He said at first he hated all of the rules and everyone who was enforcing

them. He hated his bosses but once he began to realize that they had his ultimate good in mind, eventually the men he hated became his friends.

Next Sunday I will finally talk about civil disobedience. But here's what I don't want you to do. I don't want you to think, "Aha, now we finally get to learn about all the way out government is evil and how to fight against them." When we think this way, we are thinking like Anthony. We come to hate the government, we hate the politicians and we hate all that they stand for. This is a rebellious way to view governing authorities. If you disagree, your battle is not with me, but with the Word of God.

Rich Maurer
May 31, 2015

¹ Rep. Jesse Kremer, R-Kewaskum: <http://www.lifenews.com/2015/05/07/wisconsin-pro-life-bill-introduced-to-ban-abortion-after-20-weeks-gov-scott-walker-will-sign-it/>