

THE CHRISTIAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Sermon by Mark Aites

TEXT: ROM. 13:1-7

INTRODUCTION:

1. For generations, this passage in Romans has been the center of controversy.
2. The topic of contention rests upon the extent that a Christian can obey or participate in civil government.
3. Primarily, the trouble rests with such matters as military conflicts, capital punishment, and law enforcement.
4. It would be foolish to believe that such a hot issue could be settled in 30 minutes.
5. The purpose of this lesson is not to focus on the source of contention entirely, although part of this lesson will deal recognizing the civil government, which has been ordained of God.
6. In this lesson, I want to break it down into three important areas:
 - 1) The role of civil government.
 - 2) Christian duties to the civil government.
 - 3) Participation in civil government.

DISCUSSION:

I. THE ROLE OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT (Rom. 13:1-3).

- A. The "higher powers" of God.
 1. A common rule regarding hermeneutics, is to allow the Bible to interpret itself in a given passage wherever possible.
 2. In our text, in **vs 3**, it serves as a divine commentary regarding **vs 1**, for it explains who the higher powers are; that is the rulers, i.e., those who have civil authority.
 3. Actually, the term *rulers* can serve as a metonymy, a figure of speech in which a word represents something else.
 4. In this case, rulers represents government as a whole, and not just a few of our elected officials.
- B. Paul informs us that the civil government has been ordained of God.
 1. *Ordained* -- means "to appoint to or establish in an office." (Arndt and Gingrich)
 2. We are not then, as children of God, to resent those in civil authority, for through the providence of god, they have been placed there by God (cf. **Dan. 4:17**).
 3. So we can affirm that those who are in civil authority are there because they have been ordained or appointed of God.
 4. This is not to say that they are morally upright, or right in their actions;

but simply that they have been permitted to attain this office by the will of God.

- C. Knowing that they are ordained of God, and that they have authority over us in civil matters, we should not resist them.
1. When one resists civil authority, he not only is rejecting civil authority, but also God.
 2. To willingly break the law is not only a crime against man, but also against God.
 3. And to do so, will not only bring judgment upon you from civil authorities, but also ultimately judgment from God.
 4. "The rulers have been appointed to be a terror, that is to bring fear upon those who would do evil..." (Wayne Jackson)
 5. On the other hand, praise is in order for those who obey civil authority from the same.
- D. The role of civil government is a minister of God (**13:4**).
1. Paul emphasizes the previous thoughts mentioned in **vs 3**, that if you are good you have nothing to fear, but if you are evil, there is reason to fear.
 2. *Minister* -- means "servant."
 - 1) "It says nothing about the character or spiritual nature of the subject involved." (Ibid.)
 - 2) All that this does in the Greek is indicate that the government functions as a servant of God.
- E. **Rom. 13:5**
1. Two very good reasons are given here for obeying civil authority:
 - 1) Punishment: realizing that disobedience to civil authority will bring about punishment.
 - 2) Conscience: "Our conscience is our sense of right, formed by the word of God. Ruling authorities are appointed by God, and civil officers are his servants. God having not told us this, we know it within ourselves. This knowledge forms our sense of right, and this sense is our conscience." (Moses Lard)
 - 3) "If now we do not obey the civil authorities, this sense or conscience is violated. This will not only cause us pain, but it is wrong in itself. God forms within us our conscience as a rule of conduct. It must therefore not be broken; and in order that it may not be, in the case in hand, we must obey the civil authorities." (Ibid.)

II. DUTIES TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

- A. I would bring in here the admonition of Paul recorded in **1 Tim. 2:1-2**.
1. Tertullian, one of the early church fathers wrote: "The Christian is the

enemy of no man, least of all the Emperor, for we know that he has been appointed by God, it is necessary that we should love him, and reverence him, and honour him, and desire his safety, together with that of the whole Roman Empire. Therefore we sacrifice for the safety of the Emperor.” (Ad Scapulam 2)

2. “Christians might have a tendency to leave rulers out of their prayers especially since some rulers are antagonistic to Christianity. Paul lays down the general principle applicable to all times that civil authorities (good or bad) must be objects of prayer. Prayer is a special way in which a Christian may influence the course of governments. God rules in the affairs of men. He is the King of kings, and Lord of lords (**6:15**) Hence Christians should call on his divine power on behalf of those who rule and govern in the lives of others.” (David Lipe)
3. The real purpose of praying for them is brought out in **vs 2**: *that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*
4. We should then pray for rulers, and not only pray, but also pay.

B. **Rom. 13:7**

1. When the Pharisees tried to find a way to catch or trip up Jesus in his talk, He made a remarkable statement (**Mark 12:17**).
3. And in connection with our discussion, note that Jesus never advocated not paying tribute that was due to Caesar.
4. “Some have suggested that a Christian may withhold his tax money if the government is involved in immoral enterprises. No, that is not the case. Governments have always promoted wickedness to some extent. The Roman government subsidized idolatry from public funds, yet Paul urged these brethren to pay taxes into that system. Thus, though government may promote wars, finance abortions, etc., the child of God is not implicated in such evils simply because he pays taxes.” (Wayne Jackson)
5. Our duties then are to pray, pay, and thirdly, obey.

C. We have an obligation to live in subjection to the civil government.

1. **1 Pet. 2:13-17**

2. Of all the citizens in this great nation, Christians should be the best of them all. We should be model citizens for the Lord’s sake.
3. We should strive to obey civil authority to the fullest, except when the dictates of the government clearly conflict with the laws of God.
4. We know in such cases that the will of God must take precedence (cf. **Acts 5:29**).
5. We must be careful though, that we don’t misunderstand or abuse a situation to justify ignoring the laws of the land.

III. PARTICIPATION IN CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

- A. The question that usually arises is the war question -- Can a Christian fight for his country?
 - 1. Or sometimes stated, Is the Christian justified in taking another human life in defending his country?
 - 2. Before you are quick to draw a conclusion, one way or another, I want to remind you of one of the bloodiest battles in the history of this country; the Civil War.
- B. This horrible war started on April 12, 1861, and by its conclusion, 359,000 from the north, and 250,000 from the south were dead.
 - 1. One of the terrible tragedies from this war, was that there were members of the church on both sides of the battle lines; Christians fighting Christians!
 - 2. War is never beautiful; in fact, it is horrible and disgusting.
 - 3. With the Civil War commencing, it changed the minds of many a good Christian.
- C. In the work, *Search For The Ancient Order*, it is said concerning a gospel preacher by the name of B.F. Hall:

“Hall had changed completely. He was advocating strongly the Southern cause and, all in all, acted more like a fiend than a Christian gentleman. He rode a fine mule, had a splendid rifle, and expressly requested of all friends that if a “Yankee” appeared, please let him get his share. During one conversation Hall mentioned not one word about the church, about the gospel, or what one might ordinarily expect of a preacher, but spoke only of his rifle and how many Yankees he hoped to kill.”
- D. J.W. McGarvey wrote: “But a storm of human passion, seldom equaled in the history of our sinful world, is raging around us, and we have caught the infection. The results are such as human passion must always produce. Many brethren have been swept into hopeless apostasy; the zeal of many has been chilled; distrust prevails among many who were once bosom friends; the evangelical labors of nearly all have been much contracted; churches languish; congregations dwindle, and there is a fear that such divisions as have distracted the religious sects of the day, may yet disgrace our history.” (Ibid.)
- E. The bloodiness of the war, the strife among Christians, sparked a great debate among our brethren as to the limitations of participation in civil government.
- F. Favoring participation, B.W. Johnson “argued that if government was right, the means to sustain that government is also right. He cites scriptures in the New Testament where men belonged to or held political

offices. He furthermore declared that there is not proof that the soldiers of the New Testament times ever were told to cease being soldiers after becoming Christians.” Relative to a Christian’s duty to his government, he said: “Either he can sustain it or he is an incubus to his country; a State is weak in proportion to its Christian element and the conversion of a majority of the people would result in national ruin.” (Ibid.)

G. On the other side of the debate was Alexander Campbell:

“And, stranger still, see that Christian general, with his ten thousand soldiers, and his chaplain at his elbow, preaching, as he says, the gospel of good will among men; and hear him exhort his general and his Christian warriors to go forth with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other, to fight the battles of God and their country; praying that the Lord will cause them to fight valiantly, and render their efforts successful in making as many widows and orphans as will afford sufficient opportunity for others to manifest the purity of their religion by taking care of them! If anything is wanting to finish a picture of the most glaring inconsistencies, add to this those Christians who are daily extolling the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and at the same time, the blessings of the most cruel oppression, separating the wife from the embraces of her husband, and the mother from her tender offspring; violating every principle, and rendering every tie that endears life and reconciles man to his lot; and that, forsooth, because ‘might gives right,’” (Ibid.)

H. Although Campbell’s statements were made with some sarcasm, many brethren held that the following statement best expressed their sentiments:

“But that a Christian can take up arms, kill his fellowman, make widows and orphans and cripples of innocent people, is in our opinion wholly unacceptable and irreconcilable with the very genius and nature of the Christian economy.” (Ibid.)

I. It doesn’t take much to see that this was a very bitter subject; and even today, remains a source of contention; but more so in times of war.

J. Where does one draw a line?

1. Is it wrong to be a policeman, or to be in the military?

1) If you can conclude that it is, then you are going to be hard pressed to prove it from the word of God.

2) As the point was made earlier, no where do we find the centurions being told to give up their positions; and if it were so wrong, don’t you think that God would have clearly revealed that in His Word?

3) That being said, there is some question about the taking of a human life?

2. What does the Bible say?

1) From the early parts of the Bible, when Cain killed Abel God was displeased (**Gen. 4:11**).

2) With the giving of the 10 commandments, God very strongly stated, *Thou shalt not kill* (**Exod. 20:13**).

3. I realize there are those who are quick to point out that the Israelites slaughtered many under divine command.

4. But another thought to consider is that in the New Testament, or under the new covenant, no such command is given.

5. Note also Jesus' statement (**Matt. 5:43-44**).

6. **Matt. 26:52**

K. What about today?

1. There are those who are in government, who are Christians, members of the Lord's church and not feel that they have done wrong.

2. And on the other side, those who struggle with Scriptures such as **Rom. 14:23**; *whatsoever is not of faith is sin*.

L. Where does that leave us? Many have come to the conclusion that participation in civil government is a matter of conscience, a matter of personal convictions.

CONCLUSION:

1. The overlying thought we can draw from this section of Scripture, is that God sanctions the government and as a Christian, we have the responsibility to support and obey it.

2. By doing such, we then can lead that peaceable life which will enable us to do the Lord's work:

3. Our influence will be good, our example will be good, and our environment in which to do the Lord's will, will be blessed.

4. Regardless of what sentiments you have in this matter, we must strive to do that which is pleasing to God.

5. Be it this subject, or any other, is there a reason to be concerned about your life, and whether it is pleasing to God?