

## **Respect in a COVID-19 World** *Romans 13:1-7*

### **Introduction**

By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans, it was around 56-57 AD. He most likely had already experienced his first of several imprisonments by the time he wrote his letter, and he certainly had experienced his share of harassment and physical abuse from the hands of people in authority. During his lifetime as an Apostle, Paul had experienced the reign of three Roman Emperors, of whom neither was a friend of the Church; two of the three Emperors were murdered. The most ruthless of the three emperors was Nero who died by suicide, but not before Paul was sentenced to death by beheading some time in AD 64-65.

In Paul's day, Christians and Jews were considered atheist because they claimed to worship only one God unlike the hundreds of deities worshiped in the Empire. Christians were accused of cannibalism because it was rumored that they ate human flesh and drank human blood during their sacred meetings, which is an obvious mischaracterization of communion. Christians were accused of incest because Christians referred to each other as brother or sister, even those who were married to each other.

Christians were often beaten and murdered with little protection from the law. In fact, Christians were often tortured, imprisoned, sentenced to death, and eventually forced to participate in the colosseum where they faced animals and gladiators. To be a Christian in the first century was often a death sentence, yet Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7 to Christians on how they were to respond to the laws of their government.

### **The Christian Response to Government (vv. 1-2)**

There are three major institutions that have been established by God. The first is the family, the second is the Church, and the third is human government. In many ways the family is a microcosm of both the Church and human government, for it is in the family where spiritual formation and worship begins as well as the place where authority and discipline is experienced, modeled, and taught first to our children. The family is the where a child ought to learn what it means to follow Jesus and how he/she can be a contributing and healthy member of society. Just as the Church was not invented by mankind so it is true that government was not invented by mankind either.

The Church's role in the world is to serve as the priest of God in that we speak on behalf of God and we represent God to those who do not yet know or worship him; this is called special grace. Special grace is all things related to one's eternal salvation. The Church's mission is redemptive by making disciples of all nations. The government's role is different. Human government is designed by God for the well-being of everyone; this is called common grace. The primary role of government is to maintain order and justice in a world under the curse of sin (more on this

later). Even the worst of Governments, no matter how tyrannical, serve to provide some sense of order and justice.

Anytime it is assumed that mankind is inherently good or can become better without God, it has always gone from bad to worse. We are seeing examples of this very thing in Portland and Minneapolis. The reason Romans 13:1-7 is relevant is because Romans 3:10 is true: **“None is righteous, no, not one.”** This is why Paul wrote what he wrote: **“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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment”** (Rom. 13:1-2).

**“Let every person...”** is not a suggestion but is written in the imperative; it is a command. Why must we be subject to the governing authorities? Because it has been instituted by God. So Paul continues: **“Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”** If you violate the laws that are supposed to serve the good of the people government is called to serve, then you will be punished for doing so. If you break the speed limit, you will get a ticket. If you steal, you will go to jail. If you murder, you will either live out your days in prison, or your life will be forfeited through capital punishment.

We need the institution of government just as much as we need the institution of the Church on planet earth. The Church has not been ordained by God to govern the world nor has the State been ordained to mediate the worship of God. Our job is special grace and the State’s job is common grace. Both institutions are accountable to God and serve God in different ways. Our response to government and kings is to recognize what the prophet Daniel recognized: **“God changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.... That the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will”** (Dan. 2:21; 5:21).

### **The Government’s Responsibility before God (vv. 3-4)**

The concept, “Separation of Church and State” ought to mean a division of labor between the Church and the State, not the separation of the state from God.<sup>1</sup> A government divorced from God is a godless government. However, its role remains the same as was even true for the Roman Empire. So, what is it the State is ordained by God to do? Notice what Paul wrote in verse 3, **“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but too bad.”** Or as the NIV more clearly interprets this verse: **“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.”**

The reason why your blood pressure and heart rate rise when pulled over by a police officer is most likely because you broke the speed limit. A similar fear is experienced by most people who break those laws that are meant to serve the good of society. The key to discerning whether a government or the state has overstepped its God-given role in the world is when its policies violate God’s moral law. In a sin-cursed world where people are not inherently good, human government serves to suppress evil and to encourage good conduct.

Although people are not born good, but dead, every human being is born bearing the image of God. As those who reflect the image of God, regardless of skin color or social status, there is

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul. *Romans: An Expository Commentary* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust; 2019), p. 404.

something in us that knows the difference between right and wrong. Paul points this out in Romans 2:14-15 by reflecting on the fact that even though Gentile pagan people who have never heard of the Ten Commandments demonstrate that their consciences are still affected by it because of the one whose image they bear is the author of it. Consider what Paul wrote: ***“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them”*** (Romans 2:14–15).

The reason ever government has laws in place that prohibit theft and murder is because the people in government who wrote those laws, wrote them in light of what was already written on their hearts. Those laws that fund the government to serve and protect as well as maintain order in a society are good laws and by obeying such laws serves to keep your conscience clear as well. When it comes to breaking such laws, it is not the Church that bears the sword of God’s vengeance, but the State: **“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 our God’s wrath on the wrongdoer”** (v. 4).

There are times when the State institutes laws that violate God’s moral Law, and it is then that his people are forced to disobey. Let me share with you some examples of how the Church responded to the evils of human government through ought history:

- The eventual elimination of the gladiatorial games.
- The rampant infanticide and infant exposure of unwanted children that was eventually outlawed in the Greco-Roman world.
- The eradicating of the African slave trade in Europe and the West.
- The elevation of women’s status and rights in the world based on the way Jesus treated the women in his world.
- The ending of the Jim Crow laws.
- The continued fight against abortion laws and clinics.

The Church is the voice of God that is called to speak into the darkness of the world, which includes human government; the State has no right nor the ability to do the same for the Church. We are God’s agents of God’s redemptive mission, and the God given role of human government is to serve the good of society.

### **The Character of the Christian in a Godless World (vv. 5-7)**

We are called to be men, women, and children of character, respect, and holiness whose consciences and lives are shaped by the Word and Spirit of God. Throughout the Bible there are examples given to us for how we can respond to those in authority over us when their laws are good and when their laws are bad.

When King Nebuchadnezzar wrote into the laws of his empire that all people must worship a giant golden statute he made, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego practiced civil disobedience by refusing to bow because to do so would violate God’s moral law to worship no other God but himself... even though the King threatened death, they refused (see Daniel 3). When those responsible for the laws in Jerusalem commanded the apostles to stop telling people about Jesus,

Peter responded: **“We must obey God rather than men”** (See Acts 5:17-42). There are seasons when the morally right thing to do is to respectfully stand against immoral and unjust laws even if it means retribution by the government through fines, the confiscation of property, or even death. Consider how Paul concludes:

***“Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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.”*** (Romans 13:5–7)

The Apostle Paul was repeatedly mistreated, imprisoned, and reprimanded for preaching the Gospel by those in positions of authority, but he never quit because to do so would be to disobey the One who granted authority to those who tried to silence Paul which even resulted in his eventual martyrdom. What Paul continued to obediently and respectfully do was obey the laws the government has the authority and responsibility to implement such as taxes and those laws that did not violate God’s moral law.

When forced into civic disobedience Paul and the many examples provided us in the Bible did so respectfully, honorably, and charitably. This is the principle given to us by Jesus himself when asked about paying taxes to an unholy empire; Jesus asked that a coin be brought to him and this is what he asked: **“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”** The answer of the Pharisees and Herodians: **“Caesar’s”**. So Jesus told them: **“Render to Caesar’s the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”** (see Mark 12:13-17).

Do you want to know when civil disobedience is appropriate? When Caesar demands that we give what belongs to God. If you are wondering about the spirit you are to go about rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, Romans 12:9-21 provides us with the answer:

**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 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.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**  
(Romans 12:9–21, ESV)

## **Conclusion**

When we closed down our building, we did so because we believed (and still do) that the State of Wyoming told us to do so out of a real desire to do good. Because we were unsure of what

COVID-19 was, the board of Elders, Staff, and myself believed that it was the morally right thing to do. We also understood that we could close the building down and still provide a way to continue functioning as the Church God has called us to be. Not once did our governor demand that we stop singing, worshiping, serving, or preaching. Sadly, the same cannot be said for states like California.

If and when the day does come when the State tells us how we can worship, or demands that we obey laws that would cause us to disobey the One whose authority is above theirs, then it will be time to respectfully, honorably, and charitably disobey for the purpose of obeying God. Mark my words: That day will one day come, and when it does how will you respond as an ambassador of the King of kings and Lord of lords? This is what I believe Paul means with the words: ***“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.”***