

The Christian's Responsibility to Government Part 4

Scripture: Romans 13:3–5

Code: 45-100

INTRODUCTION

The familiar portions of the epistle to the Romans are about salvation. The great argument of Romans runs from chapter 1 to the end of chapter 11. In it, Paul lays out the doctrines of justification and sanctification. Beginning in chapter 12 Paul gives the practical applications of those doctrines. Since we've been saved and set apart to God, we are to commit ourselves to a certain kind of living. Within the range of that life is a proper relationship to government--to the authority under which a Christian lives. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul tells the Christian that he has two responsibilities: to be subject to the government and pay taxes.

REVIEW

I. THE PRINCIPLE (v. 1a)

II. THE REASONS (vv. 1b-5)

Paul gives seven reasons for being subject to the government. And this subjection is unqualified. It is not determined by the kind of government, the benevolence of the government, or the theology of the government. Our subjection is simply a matter of obedience to the plan of God. He has ordained governmental authority for the protection of life and property.

A. Government Is Decreed by God (v. 1b)

B. Resistance to Government Is Rebellion Against God (v. 2a)

C. Resistance to Government Results in Punishment (v. 2b)

LESSON

D. Government Serves to Restrain Evil (v. 3a)

"For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil."

Government is designed to put fear in the hearts of people who do evil, but not to those who do good. Verse 3 continues, "Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same." Closely connected to the idea of punishment is the idea of fearing the government if you do evil.

1. The principle definedThe word "fear" is phobos in the Greek text. We get the word "phobia" from it. It refers to certain terror. Paul is saying that government is not a terror to people who do good works. The phrase "good works" refers to a class of deeds that are inherently good. But the government is a terror to those who do evil works--a class of deeds that are inherently evil. The government moves against people in society who perform evil deeds--who break the law. And that is why they have reason for having a certain amount of terror. Rulers are to bring terror to those who do evil. A government--if it is doing its job-- must put fear in the hearts of evildoers. That is a basic function of government. You and I are well aware of what happens in a government that doesn't put fear into the heart of evildoers. The results are tragic.a) Understanding basic moralityIn general, secular rulers know the difference between good and evil. Let me show you why.(1) Genesis 2:15-17--"The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou

shalt surely die." What did Adam and Eve do? They disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Therefore, when Adam and Eve sinned, they gained a knowledge of good and evil. That knowledge has been passed down through all the sons and daughters of Adam. Every man and woman that enters this world has an inherent knowledge of good and evil.(2)

Romans 2:14-15--"When the Gentiles, who have not the law [the written law], do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves; who show the work of the law written in their hearts." People of the unregenerate world have the law of God written in their hearts. What does that mean? The knowledge of good and evil is a part of everyone's conscience. In theological terms, that is referred to as "natural revelation" as opposed to "special revelation," which is Scripture.

The government of man knows the difference between good and evil. Even pagans understand basic morality through human reason, natural revelation, and common grace.

b) Preserving life and property Even the most evil society or the worst government will hold to a basic preservation of life and property. Unfortunately, some good governments do very poorly at it while some evil dictators do very well. Even the poorest government is a blessing compared to no government at all. Can you imagine what would happen in a society with no one in control? It would instantly self-destruct. If people had only themselves to protect their lives or property, there would be constant war. God has built into the heart of man a sense of what is right and wrong in very basic terms. So government is put in place by God for the purpose of preserving life and protecting property. It then becomes a terror to those who do evil-- those who steal property or take lives. But it is not a terror to those who do good. Government is designed to create this fear by taking swift action against those who do evil.

2. The principle fulfilled

Let me give you some insight into how a government is to act if it fulfills its God-ordained role to the maximum.

a) It acts without pity In Deuteronomy 19:13 we learn that a government is to act against evildoers without pity. A murderer is in view here: "Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee." In other words, "If you don't do to a murderer what he has done to someone else, you can be sure you will not prosper." That's God's promise. A government is to act against an evildoer without pity. Verse 21 says, "And thine eye shall not pity, but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." There is to be equal retribution without pity. Why? Verse 20 says, "Those who remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you." If you do not exact punishment without pity, then people won't have the fear that will restrain them from doing evil. b) It acts without partiality No one should be set apart because of personal preference. Deuteronomy 13:6-10 says, "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend who is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers, namely, of the gods of the people who are round about you, near unto thee, or far off from thee, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth, thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him. But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die, because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage." The principle detailed in those verses was unique to Israel because it was a theocracy and the crime was leading people to worship a false god. But the point I want you to see is that there is no restriction of who could be put to death. It didn't matter if the disobedient person was one's brother, son, wife, or friend; there is no partiality in fulfilling the law of God. Then verse 11 says, "All Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more any such wickedness as this is among you." If government began acting without pity and partiality when executing justice, it would go a long way in convincing evildoers to

change their ways.c) It acts without delayDeuteronomy 25:2-3 says, "And it shall be, if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten, that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten before his face, according to his fault, by a certain number. Forty stripes he may give him, and not exceed." When the judge finds a man guilty, he gives him what retribution is due right on the spot. Punishment needs to be immediate so it is obvious to all that judgment is swift.If government acted without pity, partiality, and delay, it would be a terror to evildoers. Unfortunately, we have seen the erosion of that principle. We often hear the cry of pity for the criminal. I understand the need for mercy, but I also understand what happens when mercy becomes the norm and everyone thinks they can do what they want and escape judgment. We are well aware that certain people seem to receive partial treatment for what they have done while others are more severely punished. And we all know that punishment in America is anything but without delay. If the government acts as it should, it will deter the criminal and put fear in the hearts of evildoers.

We are to submit to God's ordination of government. It is from Him. To rebel against it is to resist God. To resist Him is to bring punishment upon yourself. Government is designed to restrain evil. As Christians, we don't want to tear down what God has put in place to uphold goodness and restrain evil.

3. The principle tested

What happens if the government treats you badly? What should you do if it takes away your freedoms and encroaches on you in ways that you feel are unfair, unjust, or inequitable? Look at the example set by the apostle Paul.a) Paul's unfavorable treatmentPaul and his companion Silas were put in jail in Philippi even though they didn't do anything to deserve it. The accusation takes place in Acts 16:20-24: "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city, and teach customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans. And the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes, and commanded to beat them. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely ... and [make] their feet fast in the stocks." But what were Paul and Silas doing at midnight? Singing praises (Acts 16:25)!It is true that Paul and Silas were treated unfairly, yet it was Paul who said that we're to submit to the government. He knew what it was like to endure injustice: He was beaten with rods three times and stoned once (2 Cor. 11:25). We also need to remember that Jesus Christ suffered unjustly, yet He upholds the principle. The truth stands in spite of those times when government oversteps its bounds.b) Paul's favorable treatmentPaul had a different experience in Acts 19:35-41: "When the town clerk had quieted the people, he said, Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there that knoweth not that the city of the Ephesians is a worshiper of the great goddess, Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter? Seeing, then, that these things cannot be spoken against, ye ought to be quiet, and do nothing rashly. For ye have brought here these men, who are neither robbers of temples, nor yet blasphemers of your goddess. Wherefore, if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him, have a matter against any man, the law is open, and there are deputies; let them accuse one another. But if ye inquire anything concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly. For we are in danger to be called in question for this day's uproar, there being no cause for which we may give an account of this concourse. And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly."

In Acts 16 we see an occasion where government acted against the apostle Paul. In Acts 19 we see it act in his defense and rescue him from a mob. We should not obviate the principle of obeying the government. There are times when government may overstep its bounds and there are times when we may depend on its provision. In either case, we need to be submissive.

E. Government Serves to Promote Good (vv. 3b-4a)

1. The citizens: receiving praise (v. 3b)

"Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same."Our government has been ordained to bring praise to those who do good. Paul is saying, "Do

what is good and you won't have to fear because you will have praise from those in authority." If you enjoy a quiet and peaceful life--a life of goodness--and if you demonstrate the love of Christ, godliness, and virtue rather than making trouble, you will find yourself receiving praise.

2. The government: serving God (v. 4a)

"For he is the minister of God to thee for good." Government becomes the servant (Gk. diakonos = "deacon") of God by doing good to you. The ruler's purpose is not only to be a terror to those who do evil, but also to offer praise to those who do good. Rulers have been granted great honor because they are servants of God. The President of the United States is a servant of God. The senators, assemblymen, and justices of the United States all the way down to the officials in state and city governments are all servants of God. They carry out a God-ordained service. They uphold a divine institution. They may not know God personally, but they represent Him and His desire for peace and safety among men.

We are to do all we can to keep peace, live honorably with dignity, cultivate harmony, and be model citizens so that those who serve God in government may honor us. Evangelical, fundamental Christians who truly hold up the name of Christ should be the model of what a citizen should be in society. That will enable those who are the servants of God in government to see in them something unique and attractive.

Robert Haldane, in his commentary on Romans said, "The institution of civil government is a dispensation of mercy, and its existence is so indispensable, that the moment it ceases under one form it re-establishes itself in another" (An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans [MacDill AFB, Florida: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.], p. 581). When a coup takes place in a country, it will never eliminate government; it will only result in the exchange of government because man cannot survive without it. Haldane goes on to say, "The world, ever since the fall, when the dominion of one part of the human race over another was immediately introduced ... has been in such a state of corruption and depravity, that without the powerful obstacle presented by civil government to the selfish and malignant passions of men, it would be better to live among the beasts of the forest than in human society. As soon as its restraints are removed, man shows himself in his real character. When there was no king in Israel ... every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (p. 581).

We are called to submission because God is the source of government. To rebel against government is to resist God, and to resist God brings judgment because government serves to restrain evil and promote good. We should desire to be good so that we might enjoy the benefits of government.

F. Government Has the Right to Punish with Death (v. 4b)

"But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

If you do what is evil, be afraid, because God has given the government the right to bear the sword--and it doesn't bear the sword for nothing. You don't spank or fine people with a sword; you kill people with a sword. So Paul is saying that government is given the right to inflict final punishment--the punishment of death. God has ordained civil government to bear the sword for the purpose of putting evildoers to death. If you have ever wondered if capital punishment is biblical, you have your answer from this verse. The sword is a symbol for death.

1. Instituting the penalty

a) Genesis 9:6--When God was laying down some basic matters regarding human government, he said, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made he man." Man is sacred because he was made in the image of God. If someone took the life of a man, that person was to forfeit his own life. And government should execute that penalty without pity, partiality, and delay. b) Matthew 26:52--Peter took out his sword and started to attack the soldiers who were coming to arrest Jesus. Then the Lord said, "Put up again thy sword into its place; for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." He was telling Peter that if he took a life, he would die because that was the law. The Lord is upholding capital punishment. If you fight with the

sword, you will die by the sword. That is a divine institution.c) Acts 25:11--Paul said this to Festus the governor: "If I be an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I refuse not to die." Why did Paul say that? Because he knew that is God's standard. He affirmed the right of government to take his life if he had violated a law and was deserving of death.

The Old Testament prescribes the death penalty for murder, striking one's parent, blasphemy, witchcraft, involvement in the occult, false prophecy, rape, immorality, homosexuality, kidnapping, idolatry, and a blasphemous violation of the holiness of the Sabbath. God has ordained government to have the right to take a life.

2. Inflicting the penalty

Romans 13:4 says that the government is the minister of God. Part of the ministry of God in government for the good of man is to make evildoers afraid of the sword. Government is to serve God as an avenger of those who have been wronged. God requires capital punishment for those who commit crimes deserving that penalty. Robert Culver says, "What must not be lost sight of is that unpleasant as is the task of the jailor and the use of the whip, the cell, the noose, the guillotine, these things stand behind the stability of civilized society, and they stand there necessarily, for God has declared it so, in harmony with reality, rather than with apostate sociological opinion.

Government, with its coercive powers is a social necessity, but one determined by the Creator, not by the statistical tables of some university social research staff! No society can successfully vote fines, imprisonment, corporeal and capital punishment away permanently. The society which tries has lost touch with realities of man (his fallen sinful state), realities of the world, and the truth of divine revelation in nature, man's conscience, and the Bible" (Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government [Chicago: Moody Press, 1974], p. 256). Society can't do that and survive. God has ordained government to bear the sword.a) The avenging governmentVengeance belongs to God, and it often comes through the government. Romans 12:19 says, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves but, rather, give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." As Christians, we can thank God that government has the right to use the sword. I don't like to think of people losing their lives, but I think the way to stop people from murdering each other is to make it very clear that if you take a life, you'll immediately lose yours. That will protect the sanctity of life.b) The bloodguilty governmentWhen deaths are not satisfied, a nation become bloodguilty.

(1) Genesis 4:9-11--Cain murdered Abel. Verse 9 says, "The Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel, thy brother? And he said, I know not: am I my brother's keeper?" He was not only a murderer, but a liar as well. Satan is the father of lies and has been a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). So, Cain was mirroring the one who had no doubt inspired him to kill Abel. The Lord said, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand" (vv. 10-11). When Cain killed Abel, his blood cried out to God because it was unrequited. A life had been taken with no life given in return. There had been no retribution. That's why the blood cried out to God.In Genesis 9:6 God laid down the following principle: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." A murderer is to lose his life. That alone will satisfy the unrequited blood and in turn satisfy God.

(2) Genesis 42:22--"Reuben answered them, saying, Spoke I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? Therefore, behold, also his blood is required." Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery, and now they were feeling guilty for doing so. Reuben told them that until a life was given for Joseph's life, God would remain unsatisfied. He recognized the principle that God had established.(3) Joshua 2:19--Spies from Israel told Rahab, who had helped them escape, "And it shall be, that whosoever shall go out of the doors of thy house into the street, his blood shall be upon his head, and we will be guiltless; and whosoever shall be with thee in the house, his blood shall be on our head, if any hand be upon him." Whenever there was guilt from the

loss of a life, someone's blood had to be shed. That is why the men told Rahab, "His blood shall be on our head, if any hand be upon him."(4) 2 Samuel 4:11--This chapter describes the murder of Ish-Bosheth, Saul's son. Verse 11 says, "How much more, when wicked men have slain a righteous person in his own house upon his bed? Shall I not, therefore, now require his blood of your hand, and take you away from the earth?" If you take a life, you give a life. Your blood is required for his blood. The pattern is the same throughout the Old Testament. Blood was required for the shedding of blood.

(5) Ezekiel 7:20-27--"As for the beauty of his ornament, he set it in majesty; but they made the images of their abominations and of their detestable things of it; therefore have I set it far from them. And I will give it into the hands of the strangers for a prey, and to the wicked of the earth for a spoil, and they shall pollute it" (vv. 20-21). When the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, they profaned the temple. The Lord continues, "My face will I turn also from them, and they shall pollute my secret place; for the robbers shall enter into it, and defile it. Make a chain; for the land is full of bloody crimes" (vv. 22-23). The primary reason that God brought judgment on Israel during the Babylonian Captivity was that the nation was full of bloody crimes--murders for which there had been no retribution. The blood was crying out to God and the city was full of violence. If you show me a place where the rulers don't execute murderers and those who commit severe crimes, I'll show you a place full of violence. The Lord continues, "Wherefore, I will bring the worst of the nations, and they shall possess their houses; I will also make the pomp of the strong to cease, and their holy places shall be defiled. Destruction cometh; and they shall seek peace, and there shall be none. Mischief shall come upon mischief, and rumor shall be upon rumor; then shall they seek a vision from the prophet, but the law shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the ancients. The king shall mourn, and the prince shall be clothed with desolation, and the hands of the people of the land shall be troubled; I will do unto them after their way, and according to their deserts will I judge them; and they shall know that I am the Lord" (vv. 24-27). God is saying, "I'm going to bring a terrible judgment because this land is full of bloody crimes and violence, since judgment is not executed on evildoers."

(6) Ezekiel 18:10-13--After describing what a man will receive if he is obedient, God describes what will happen if the man's son is disobedient: "If he beget a son that is a robber, a shedder of blood, and that doeth the like to any one of these things, and that doeth not any of those duties, but even hath eaten upon the mountains, and defiled his neighbor's wife, hath oppressed the poor and needy, hath spoiled by violence, hath not restored the pledge, and hath lifted up his eyes to the idols, hath committed abomination, hath given forth upon interest, and hath taken increase, shall he then live? He shall not live; he hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him." Bloodguiltiness must be requited. Those kinds of crimes must be paid for with blood.

3. Interpreting the penalty

Does God do that because He hates people? No. God knows that when capital punishment is executed properly, it becomes a terror to evildoers and restrains them from doing evil. Men need restraints because they are basically vile. God requires the death penalty not so He can kill people, but so people will not have to die. When the law of the land is made according to the law of God, it restrains the criminal. Then there will be no victims or perpetrators. But when blood is shed and it remains unrequited, the nation becomes guilty and God will judge it. Numbers 35:33 says, "So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are; for blood defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it." The land will never be cleansed of shed blood until that blood is requited. **Why is America in such a mess?** I could give you many reasons for the mess that America is in. For one, this nation is under the judgment of God for unrequited blood, which cries out to God for retribution against murderers, robbers, and others who are worthy of death. Were they dealt with properly, the number of victims and perpetrators would be minimized. But they are not and our land is guilty. I believe with all my heart that abortion is murder. Our nation is guilty to an inconceivable extent in the massacre of unborn children.

Pacifism is not advocated in the New Testament. Government has the right to the sword. If it doesn't use it, the land cries out for unrequited blood. This land cries out from the blood of millions upon millions of unborn children who were murdered. It also cries out for all the other unsatisfied murders. Most of the killers have never been made to face retribution. I believe that is reason enough for God to bring judgment against the United States even as He did against Israel. It has become full of bloody crimes--a land filled with violence.

G. Submission to Government Builds the Conscience (v. 5)

"Wherefore, ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath but also for conscience sake."

You need to be subject not only because you fear the consequences, but also because you know what is right. Your motivation isn't all negative, and this should be the highest motivation. Yet fear has to be a factor. There needs to be punishment without pity, partiality, and delay. There must be blood for blood, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot. Yes, we are to conform because we fear. But the higher motive is to conform not only for wrath's sake, but also for conscience's sake. We know what is right when we love the law, having a conscious commitment to obey God. That is the higher and purer motive. And that's what Peter meant when he said, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" (1 Pet. 2:13).

Do you obey the law because you're afraid of what will happen if you don't? Do you govern your life by fear, or do you think about obeying the law for the sake of honoring your Lord? The latter is the higher motive. We need both motivations, but I hope you're committed to the higher one. The conscience is that inner voice-- that little place inside of us where God speaks of what is right and wrong. It is in the conscience that we should find our strongest motivation. There's no place for rebellion on the part of a Christian. We are to do what is right--submit.

Focusing on the Facts

1. To whom does the government become a terror (Rom. 13:3)?
2. Why do secular rulers know the difference between good and evil deeds?
3. What will the most evil society or the worst government hold to?
4. In what ways will a government act towards evildoers when it fulfills its role to the maximum?
5. Why should government deal out equal retribution without pity (Deut. 19:20)?
6. What happens when a government doesn't fulfill its role as it should?
7. How should you respond if government treats you badly? How did Paul and Silas respond (Acts 16:25)?
8. What will those who do good receive from the government (Rom. 13:3)?
9. In what sense are all government officials servants of God (Rom. 13:4)?
10. If government acts as it should, why should people be afraid of it if they do evil (Rom. 13:4)?
11. When did God institute the death penalty?
12. What are some of the crimes for which the Old Testament prescribed the death penalty?
13. What act of God is government fulfilling when it uses capital punishment on evildoers (Rom. 12:19)?
14. What happens to a nation when it doesn't satisfy a death?
15. Why did Abel's blood cry out to God (Gen. 4:10)?
16. What was God's primary reason for bringing judgment on the nation of Israel in the Babylonian Captivity (Ezek. 7:23)?
17. Why does God want governments to utilize capital punishment?
18. What should be the Christian's highest motivation for submitting to the government (Rom. 13:5)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Have you ever experienced unfair treatment from your government? Explain. How did you respond in that situation? What can you learn from the experience of Paul and Silas in Acts 16:25? Have you

ever been protected by your government? Explain. Why is it to your benefit to submit to your government no matter how it treats you?

2. Does your government reward people for doing good? List some of the ways in which government rewards people. What is your response when you see the government praising someone for doing good? What should that make you want to do?

3. Based on this lesson, has your perspective of capital punishment changed or been strengthened? How has it changed? How has it been strengthened? If the issue of capital punishment came to a vote in your country or state, how would you vote?

4. Do you find yourself more committed to submit to the government out of fear or for the sake of your conscience? If to obey for the sake of conscience is the higher motive, then you need to take a closer look at the motive for your obedience. Ask God to help you to be more sensitive to His conviction. Each time you are called to submit to some institution of government, examine your motive for doing so. Seek to obey with the higher motive.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).