

Submission to Civil Authority, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:13a–b

Code: 60-24

INTRODUCTION

Those who call themselves Christians sometimes harm the testimony of true Christianity by the way they behave toward civil authorities. Although believers are to set their affections on heaven, they are also to be godly citizens in society. That's why the apostle Peter said, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (1 Pet. 2:13). He was commanding believers to respect civil authority.

Peter wrote to believers living under a pagan, hostile, and anti-Semitic Roman government. Many assumed that Christianity was nothing more than a sect of Judaism. Believers became the objects of slander closely associated with malicious rumors that had already been circulating about the Jewish people. Apion, for example, made this false accusation: "In the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jews every year fattened a Greek, and having solemnly offered him up as a sacrifice on a fixed day in a certain forest, ate his entrails and swore eternal hostility to the Greeks" (cited by William Barclay in The Letters of James and Peter, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], p. 202).

Believers were also accused of insurrection against Rome and all human authority. The Jewish religious leaders used that charge against Christ (cf. John 19:15). Believers were also accused of being atheists because they refused to worship pagan gods, including Caesar. They were accused of cannibalism because their enemies distorted the teaching of Christ and Paul regarding Communion (cf. John 6:53; 1 Cor. 10:16).

Believers were also accused of immorality. Long before Freud spoke of the Oedipus complex, pagans accused Christians of having incestuous relationships with one another simply because the believers referred to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The Scriptural injunction to "greet one another with a holy kiss" was likewise maligned.

In addition, believers were accused of damaging trade in the idol-making business (Acts 19:21-41). They were accused of destroying family life since homes were often divided when some family members became Christians, but others did not. They were accused of fostering slave rebellion since a believing slave received new life and dignity in Christ. They were accused of hating people because they wouldn't adopt the world's ways.

Believers are to respond to such slander and hostility with godly living (1 Pet. 2:12; see pp. xx-xx). That silences the critics, leaves no justification for false charges, and attracts unbelievers to Christ. Today society continues to be hostile against biblical Christianity. Although it is intolerant of truth and righteousness, we are to live as godly citizens and obey our civil authorities because that's what 1 Peter 2:13 teaches us to do.

LESSON

I. THE COMMAND FOR SUBMISSION (v. 13a)

"Submit yourselves."

The Greek term translated "submit yourselves" (hupotass[ma]o) is a military word that pictures a soldier under the rank of a commanding officer. The command could be translated, "Put yourselves in an attitude of submission." The ancient world tended to associate that attitude with cowards and weaklings, but God's Word teaches that submission to civil authority is the divine and right way to

live.

A. Proverbs 24:21

"Fear the Lord and the king; do not associate with those who are given to change; for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin that comes from both of them?" God's people are to respect both divine and human authority, being careful not to ally themselves with troublemakers or insurrectionists.

B. Jeremiah 29:7

In Babylon the Jewish captives were in a pagan land ruled by an evil king. But the Lord said to His people, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare." The Hebrew term translated "welfare" (shalom) means "peace." God's people were to pray for peace in the land and seek its welfare by building houses, planting gardens, and rearing godly families (v. 6). They were to rest in His sovereign control of the situation, not take matters into their own hands (vv. 8-14).

C. Romans 13:1-2

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves." Even though slavery, physical abuse, murder, and immorality dominated Roman society and government, believers were to submit to civil authority because it was divinely ordained.

D. Matthew 22:21

Christ said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." As believers we are to pay whatever taxes we owe to the government.

II. THE MOTIVE FOR SUBMISSION (v. 13b)

"For the Lord's sake."

A. To Obey the Lord

The Lord has ordained civil authority (Rom. 13:1-7). So when a believer submits himself to it, he is obeying the Lord. When civil authorities say, "Do this," and it doesn't violate the teaching of God's Word, we should obey. God's kingdom doesn't benefit from disobedience.

We are to acknowledge God's control in all situations, not be troublemakers or lawbreakers. That's illustrated by what the Lord told the nation of Judah: "I will regard as good the captives of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. And I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am the Lord; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart" (Jer. 24:5-7). Judah was not to rebel against its captors, but accept its situation as part of God's sovereign plan.

In his book A Biblical View of Civil Government Bible teacher Robert Culver wrote, "God alone has sovereign rights.... Democratic theory is no less unscriptural than divine right monarchy. By whatever means men come to positions of rulership--by dynastic descent, aristocratic family connection, plutocratic material resources, or by democratic election, 'there is no power but of God' (Ro 13:1). Furthermore, civil government is an instrument, not an end. Men are proximate ends, but only God is ultimate end. The state owns neither its citizens nor their properties, minds, bodies, or children. All of these belong to their Creator-God, who has never given to the state rights of eminent domain" ([Chicago: Moody, 1974] p. 47). God is the ultimate authority who calls us to obey His divine law.

B. To Imitate the Lord

When the believer submits to civil authority, he not only obeys the Lord, but also imitates the example Christ purposely left us (1 Pet. 2:21). When reviled by His enemies, He "did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges

righteously" (v. 23). Although Christ lived under the pagan Roman government, He didn't attack its rulers. He never led a protest march against Roman or Jewish authorities. Even though His own trial was a mockery, He did not lash out against the authorities because of it.

Instead of concerning Himself with earthly matters, Christ spoke only of God's kingdom, calling sinners to repentance and inviting them to come to Him (cf. Matt. 11:28-30). He entrusted Himself to God, bearing our sins on the cross at the hands of both Roman and Jewish authorities.

C. To glorify the Lord

1. By obeying civil laws

God is honored when the lost observe Christians characterized by submission, virtue, kindness, graciousness, and humility. Educator and minister Robert Haldane well said, "The people of God ... ought to consider resistance to the government under which they live as a very awful crime" (Commentary on Romans [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988], p. 587). Such resistance is often manifested in anger and hatred, both of which are obvious sins.

It's sad to see those who name Christ defy the very government He has ordained. Romans 13:3-5 says, "Rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake."

When civil authorities uphold law and order, they function as God's ministers, fulfilling a God-ordained role of keeping order in society. If a person obeys the law, he has no reason to fear. But if he breaks it, he should fear because God has ordained civil authorities to punish lawbreakers. That we're to submit "for conscience' sake" means we're to do it because it's right.

2. By obeying God's Word

The one exception is if civil authorities tell us to do something that would violate God's Word. In Acts 4:18 the Sanhedrin commanded Peter and John "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." But Peter and John said, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (vv. 19-20; cf. 5:29). As believers we must stand for the Lord and be willing to suffer the consequences.

But we must be careful not to go beyond the teaching of God's Word. When the authorities put Paul and Silas in stocks for preaching the Word in Philippi, the two sang hymns of praise (Acts 16:23-25). They certainly weren't rebelling against the authorities or resisting arrest. The Lord used their submissiveness and godliness to lead others to salvation (vv. 31-34).

3. By fighting with spiritual weapons

Paul realized we as Christians are engaged in spiritual warfare: "Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

The Greek term translated "weapons" (hoplon) refers to instruments of war. We are to fight with divinely-powered spiritual weapons, not man-made ones. "Destruction" (kathairesis) means "to tear down." Our spiritual weapons effectively tear down massive strongholds of sin and Satan such as "speculations" (logismos) and "lofty [things]" (hups[ma]oma), which refer to human thoughts and reasoning. The term "every" shows the tearing down to be comprehensive. Verses 3-5 picture an army moving against a city and tearing down everything in its path.

Believers are to be "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (v. 5). That pictures a soldier using a spear to take prisoners of war. All thoughts that oppose God are to bow in obedience to Christ. As believers we have two prominent spiritual weapons.

a) God's Word Ephesians 6:17 calls us to arm ourselves with God's Word. We are to preach God's

Word with power and conviction, calling sinners to repentance. The preaching of God's Word is always effective (cf. Isa. 55:11).^b Prayer Another spiritual weapon is prayer. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul says, "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." Through prayer the lost hear the gospel and are saved (vv. 3-6).

CONCLUSION

The early church submitted itself to the pagan Roman government, realizing that God ordains civil authority. What about you? Will you honor and obey God and His Word by submitting to your civil authorities?

Focusing on the Facts

1. Although believers are to set their affections on heaven, they are also to be in society.
2. What does Proverbs 24:21 teach?
3. How were the Jewish captives to behave toward the Babylonian government (Jer. 29:7-14)?
4. Why were believers to submit to the Roman government (Rom. 13:1-2)?
5. What does Matthew 22:21 teach?
6. When a believer submits to civil authority, he is obeying the _____.
7. What does Jeremiah 24:5-7 illustrate?
8. What example did Christ leave us in 1 Peter 2:23?
9. What did Robert Haldane call "a very awful crime"?
10. When civil authorities uphold law and order, they function as (Rom. 13:4).
11. What does "for conscience' sake" mean in 1 Peter 2:13?
12. What does Acts 4:19-20 teach?
13. What must we be careful not to do? How is that illustrated in Acts 16:23-34?
14. We as Christians are engaged in (2 Cor. 10:3-5).
15. How effective are our spiritual weapons (2 Cor. 10:3-5)?
16. What are two prominent spiritual weapons?

Pondering the Principles

1. Commentator John Brown wrote, "It is the duty of a Christian to yield obedience to all laws of the government under which he lives, that are not inconsistent with the law of God. When the human ordinance contradicts the Divine ordinance, requiring us to do what God forbids, or forbidding us to do what God requires, the rule is plain: 'We ought to obey God rather than man' [Acts 5:29]. Nothing short of this, however, can warrant a Christian to withhold obedience from a law of the government under which, in the providence of God, he is placed" (Expository Discourses on 1 Peter [Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975], pp. 349-50). Evaluate your attitude toward civil authority. Does it agree with the teaching of God's Word? Ask the Lord to help you be submissive and respectful to the authorities. That way your life will honor the Lord and attract unbelievers to Christ.
2. "For conscience' sake" (1 Pet. 2:13) means we're to submit to civil authorities because it's the right thing to do. Robert Culver wrote, "The Christian serves his country, obeys its laws, and supports its rulers so far as a biblically informed conscience lets him, not out of servile fear or out of rigid dogmatic necessity, but because he knows it is right. Right (understood as expression of the will of the Creator-God) is ultimately the ground of all righteous action" (Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government, p. 256). Therefore "let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

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