

THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

Dr. George O. Wood

Romans 13:1-7 on this special patriotic Sunday we want to consider a special foundational New Testament passage which speaks to us about Christian responsibility to Christ and to country. With Wednesday being July 4th I want to talk about our responsibilities as citizens. And what the Bible teaches on this subject must not only apply to America citizens but apply to Christian citizens of any country. I should be able to preach the same message from Romans 13:10-7 in the Soviet Union as I would preach to Christians in America. Or to Christians in China or Cuba or Canada or India or Argentina or Uganda or anywhere.

The book of Romans, the letter of Paul to the Romans was written at a time when the emperor Nero was on the throne before things really got bad for the Christians. Just a year or two before they really turned. Yet it's interesting as you watch the unfolding of the New Testament that the admonition to Christians given in Romans 13 when times had not yet turned really bad is repeated when the holocaust had broken out. Paul tells Timothy in chapter 2 of 1 Timothy I urge, requests prayers intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone especially for kings and those in authority. He says to Titus in 3:1 "Remind people to be subject to rulers and authorities." That was not an easy admonition. Peter also writing in a time of tremendous adversity against the church tells the Christians "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men. Whether to the king as the supreme authority or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."

So the witness of the New Testament to Christian responsibility is an unbroken one. We want to look in the Romans 13 passage about three specific things that address us as to our responsibilities to Christ and country.

First thing we want to look at is that this passage gives us a command. A command for submission to governing authorities. Is the first part of verse 1. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities." Governing authorities are simply those placed or stationed in a fixed spot and it refers to governmental authority. Both constitutional authority, authority of office and the authority of those persons acting within the function of their office. This admonition to be subject to such authority affects all Christians. It is everyone must submit themselves.

We recognize that there are rankings within authority. There may be occasion when we have been checked by an authority and we are not to appeal beyond that level of authority.

For example if I get a speeding ticket and I'm brought into the municipal judge I then should either try to go to driver's school. There's no sense appealing that. I'm guilty under the law and I must submit to judgment of the law.

On the other hand perhaps the issue is whether or not high school students can use the secular campus to have a Bible study. Maybe the lower court turns it down. But in our system of constitutional government I could continue to appeal until I reach the highest level of authority that will consider my case. Once that judgment is handed down I must obey it. Unless the judgment handed down requires of me to be disobedient to God. And there is only one real

where the Christian is ever given permission to not be subject to authority. And that is if he state or the government commands of us something that our faith will nto allow.

Thus Peter says to governmental authority in Acts 5:29 “We must obey God rather than man.” If it comes to a choice like this then we need to be prepared to rejoice in the punishment that is given out in being disobedient to authority.

But other than that the command is to be subject.

The second part of this passage gives us reasons for the command to be subject to governing authority. There are two basic reasons given. The first reason is that government and those who govern are set in place by God. For there is no authority except that which god has established. The authority that exists have been established by God. Consequently he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted andthose who do so will bring judgment upon themselves.

Perhaps we have no problem withthisparticular passage aboutthose being I nthe government and government it self being set in order by God. We have not too manyproblems with that living in a democratic society. Where basically we perceive the institutions as being good and non repressive. The problem however comes with this prase, “No authority except that whih God has established.” Meaning to say that all human government and those who govern, owe their position to the fact that God has set them in place or allowed them to be set in place. G od therefore raises up nations and the leaders of those nations. He raises up he united states. He and his permissive will has raised up the current president to servce, president Reagan. But he has also raised up the U.S.S.R. and Cuba cand France. You can go through the family iof nations and suggest the leaders of each. This passage is saying that all such authority is set in place by God.

This is in correspondence with what daniel says three times in chapter 4:17, 25, 32. The m ost high rules the kingdom of men and ives it to whom he will.” Jesus says to Pilot, “You would have no authority or power over me unless it had been given to you from above.” John 19:11.

This hen creates a fundamental problem for the Christian as to why God who allow unjust leaders and unjust rulers to emerge. The scripture itself provides some answers as to why God allowed evil rulers.

Sometimes we deserve them. Scriptures tal about sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind. Sometimes a nation may deserve corrupt leadership such as Israel during the time iof Judges basically got the government that the morality of the country deserved.

Sometimes an evil nation is raised up to be an agent of judgment. That was the case of Babylon. God raised Babylon up for the express intention of bringing judgment upon his disobedient people.

Sometimes an evil nation is raised up to be the recipient of judgment. Thus God raised up Pharoah to receive his judgment for his injustice.

Sometimes a government especially manifests the work of jsatan and demonstrates the power of the evil one. Such a government was Hitler’s.

Sometimes a government that is evil is raised up to work out God's purposes in history. That's how the early Christians understood the government of Rome. Without Rome there would not have been a unified world language. There would not have been roads. And there would not have been a transportation or a communication system that would have allowed the spread of the gospel conveniently as happened during the Roman first century world.

Sometimes an evil government is allowed because it will manifest the loyalty of the believer. That's such an instance Daniel has as he appears before governmental authority.

All governmental authority though reminds us that God himself stands superior to that authority. If we look as to the particular purpose of God raising the United States up we might even be so bold as to suggest that because of the way that American Christians have had a heart for the world that he has allowed us a special place as being a light distribution center of the gospel for the world.

But government and those who govern are set in place by God.

The second reason Paul gives as to why we should obey the command to be subject is that government is given to restrain and to punish evil doers. Verses 3 and 4. "rulers hold no error for those who do right. But for those who do wrong do you want to be free from one in authority. Then do what's right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword for nothing or in vein. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrong doer."

Therefore government exists and we should be subject to it because its unique purpose is to restrain and punish evil and evil doers. Where there is no government everyone will do what is right in their own eyes. This is why the Bible takes the position that government is an institution of God and in practically any form is preferable to anarchy.

Imagine for a moment that all government was removed from Costa Mesa for seven days and you were a citizen of this town. It would mean basically that any one could assault you or person or plunder your property and you would have no protection or redress. Government is important.

It's fascinating in the New Testament to observe that although the individual Christian is forbidden to take vengeance on their own authority, the government has not been forbidden to take vengeance. In fact, Paul says in verse 4 that the government is God's minister or servant to execute wrath on the wrong doer. The word there for "servant" in verse 4 is the Greek word deacon which is an office in the church. And the government is God's deacon to carry out the administration of justice or law with order in society.

Therefore Romans 13 is a necessary balance to the teaching which Jesus gives in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. Because there in the sermon on the Mount Jesus basically says to us that we are to if we suffer wrong not seek revenge but return good for evil. This then raises the question as to whether the rapist, the murderer, the thief gets off scot free. No. Is that Paul is replying. He's help[ing] us to understand that Jesus was forbidding personal retaliation. But the government, the state, existed so that civil law might meet out justice on the other.

It is that kind of a law that no one takes into his own hands. In fact to the state or the government has been given the power even to take life. The power of the sword. This may be

necessary in the defence of the government's need to protect its people from dangers within and enemies without.

The government mishandles its power when it does not restrain evil. Or when it polutes justice.

The emperor Trajan presented a provincial governor on starting for his province a dagger with these words inscribed on it. "For me. If I deserve it, in me." The power to execute justice is given for the state. If the state misuses it then judgment comes upon the government itself.

As Christians and as citizens of this country we should become alarmed when our legislative, executive, and judicial systems are not a terror to bad conduct. The government as it exists is meant to be a terror to bad conduct.

I might add parenthetically that I think as Christians we would be concerned if all of those involved in the sin of adultery got together and had an adultery pride week and had a parade and the mayor or the city and the chairperson of the city council showed up as the grand marshal of the parade. We feel the same way if thieves got together or if there was an abortion pride week. I think as Christians dealing with sin all across the board we need to let our elected leaders know that we really do not approve of their participating in events that celebrate sexual perversion. We need to make that clear that if government will not be a terror to evil then let the Christians be a terror to the elected official with their ballots. As Christians we have been too asleep too long in this country on the social issues. We need to come back to where the New Testament understands the function of a Christian citizen. Government is meant to restrain and keep a lid as much as possible. Realizing government cannot reform human behavior. Only the gospel can reform human behavior. But the purpose of government is to restrain, to keep a lid on lawlessness from breaking out.

The third part of this passage tells us our response as Christians to the government.

The first response is one that has already been noted. To be subject to the government. Again, it is repeated in verse 5. "Therefore it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." Two reasons to be subject. One is for the sake of possible punishment or wrath. It's interesting here that the word "wrath" would be used of the government. There's only one person who can execute wrath in the scripture and that is God. That is a term reserved for his just judgment. On earth the only one that has the authority to execute sentence is mandated by God to be the government or the state official. Therefore punishment that involves a prison sentence or involves the exercise of justice sometimes is meant to be seen from the New Testament as God acting through government to himself pass sentence. Therefore government has a delegated authority from God to execute justice. And therefore for the sake of wrath for the sake of being caught, found out and punished. Paul says if for no other reason we ought to be subject to the government. This means even not cheating on your internal revenue forms. The reason why we don't, the most elemental reason is I don't want to get caught. Hopefully there are better reasons than that. But if all other reasons fail, that ought to be the bottom line. We don't want to get caught and pay what might be involved.

Which reminds me of a guy who wrote the Internal Revenue Service this note with a check enclosed, "A few years ago I cheated on my income taxes. My conscience has been troubling me and I haven't been able to sleep. So I enclose a check for fifty dollars. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

We're to be subject for the sake of possible punishment. And we're also to be subject for the sake of conscience. Because we have as Christians an informed conscience that talks to us about right and wrong.

One of the ways, by the way, we can be subject to the government in a democracy is to participate in the government. To be informed citizens. To be registered to vote citizens. To be voting citizens. To be involved in the political process and know what are the issues of the day and to know the candidates that are involved. We need more Christians in this body running for public office. We're meant to be the salt and the light of the world.

Our first response is to be subject. Our second response to the government is to be those who pay the taxes. Isn't that great news? "This is also why you pay taxesssssssssssssssss [verse 6] for the authorities are God's servants who give their full time to governing."

There's an interesting phrase here. It says the tax collector is God's servant. Earlier in verse 4 it said the government was God's deacon. But the word he uses in verse 6 for "servant" is a different word than the word "deacon." It is the word from which we derive the word "liturgy." The word is used in the Bible period to describe those who are engaged in priestly service. Such as Zachariah, John the Baptist's father Luke 1:23 was engaged in service of the temple in priestly service. So, if you will, the tax collector enjoys from God a priestly function in his ministry to the state. His job is to collect the revenues, the income taxes, the transport taxes, the sales taxes, property taxes. All that like. Pay them.

In America we have the advantage that we can participate in deciding sometimes how much we want to pay. Many other countries that isn't possible.

The third responsibility we have as Christian citizens is to respect and honor those who are in authority. "Give everyone what you owe him. If you have taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honor, then honor." At the time this was written Nero was the emperor. He had a very blatant immoral lifestyle. Nero was a bisexual. He had both a heterosexual marriage and a homosexual marriage which was publicly celebrated in the streets of Rome. He wound up ultimately killing his own mother. He was a despot in the true sense of what it means to be a despot. Yet Paul in writing to Christians of the office of emperors says to respect and give honor to that office. Peter says the same thing. Honor the emperor. There is a sense of not an honor toward a man but an honor toward an office. Therefore respect to the person who holds the office as he is functioning in the official capacity that office brings him. It's an important principle because Christians are meant to be respectful toward those in authority even those whose political positions and moral lifeleaves much to be desired. For the sake of the well functioning of society and the government and for a model of Christian example we are meant to respect and to honor.

Paul in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 gives us one additional responsibility to the government and that is to pray for it. Why pray for the government, "That we might lead quiet and peace lives in all godliness and holiness." The Christian is to pray for peace.

There's some prophetic watchers that when things begin happening in the middle east or elsewhere we ought to sort of take the ambivalent attitude, This must be the beginning of the end time. And we almost feel guilty sometimes praying for peace. But the New Testament tells us to pray for the leaders so that we might live quiet and peace lives, untroubled by the tramas of

war and untroubled by upheaval at home. To pray that this might happen because the church of Jesus Christ and Christians can marvelously prosper and advance the gospel in a time of peace.

This week I had a delightful experience of working with some research data and collecting it and trying to translate it into meaningful data. But I thought to close this sermon I wanted to give us some idea of the appreciation that we can have as Americans for the incredible prosperity of our country. And I think the corresponding humility that it ought to produce in us to realize how much we have. To whom much is given, much is required.

Suppose that we could take the 4.7 billion people of this world and place them representatively in a thousand person village. Let's say that the village will be 100 square miles instead of the earth's land area of 52.5 million square miles. We have a thousand people representing 4.7 billion living in a hundred square miles representing 52.5 million square miles. Out of these thousand citizens in this global village only five would be Americans. 995 would be non-Americans. The five Americans would only live on three square miles of the village's land. The other 995 would have 997 of the village's square miles. But these five Americans would produce 20% of the village's gross national product. The five Americans would own two cows. And the other 995 non-Americans would have one cow for every ten persons. The five Americans would produce 43% of the village's corn, 16% of its meat, 12% of its milk, 15% of its wheat, and 15% of its steel. Each American would drink four cans of beer to one twelfth of a can for each of the other 995 villagers. The Americans would own almost all of the personal computers in the village. Of the ten phones in the village the Americans would own four. The other 995 non-American villagers would have to share the remaining six phones among them. On their three square miles the Americans would have 21% of the village's railroad tracks, and 28% of the village's roads. The Americans would own and drive four of the village's ten cars and four of the village's ten commercial vehicles such as trucks. Only five percent of the population, these five Americans would be yet they would use 29% of the village's electricity. On their small patch of three miles of land, the Americans would have half of the village's pipelines. Each American villager could take a trip on an airline 325 times before one of the other villagers get on once. An American would sleep in a hotel bed eighty times before another villagers could have a turn. Or an American would spend 20 days in a hospital bed before a non-American villager would have a single day. The five Americans would have one of the village's nine doctors to say nothing about the quality of the other eight doctors in the village. Seven of the village's 36 nurses and midwives and one of the village's three dentists. The five would have one dentist and the 995 would have two dentists. The Americans would be far better informed, producing and using 37% of the paper in the village. The five Americans would have two of the village's ten newspapers. Produce and read ten of the village's 100 books. So the five Americans would each have two radios while the rest of the village would have to get along with one radio for every four persons. The Americans would have four of ten television sets in the village, the Americans would have four of those sets and the other 995 people would have to group around the remaining six sets. The Americans would be far better educated. All five of the Americans in the village would read. While only two thirds of the non American men would read. And a little more of one half of the non American villagers could read. The Americans would have a ten times greater enrollment in college and would have four of the village's ten university professors. The infant mortality rate for the non American 995 villagers would be 10%. One baby out of ten born on that side of the village would die. But the American infant rate of mortality would only be one percent. One baby out of every hundred on the American side would die. Each of the American men could expect to live 68.7 years, 12.7 years longer than their non American 995 villagers. Each American woman can expect to live 76.5 years, 17.5 years longer than the other women in the village.

With such incredible wealth of productivity, of natural products in terms of food, with use of the world's transportation facilities, its educational facilities, its health care, this country enjoys of all countries a unique place in the world. We can either take these statistics as a We're better than them. Or we can take them with humility and say, If God has given us so much then he also must want to require so much from us. As precious is our American citizenship is to us it is even more critical to us that we be citizens of heaven. But our citizenship is not in America. It is in heaven. And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. We the whole body of Christ, have the unique privilege of belonging to a country where we may practice freedom of faith, freedom of speech, freedom to enquire, freedom to live. But the most special privilege has been given every believer in Jesus Christ of belonging to the kingdom that cannot pass away, let's be good citizens of this world. Let's be great citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Our Father, we thank you for these moments we have shared today in your presence and we thank you again for our country, for the unique privileges that are ours in this country. That is why, Lord, our heart must always be reaching out toward the world and toward others. Because we dare not eat our bread alone. We realize Lord that you have established government that it might uphold justice, might punish the evil doer, and might properly care for the poor. We pray, Lord, that these same purposes will be our purposes for the government of our country. That we may be on the side that is just. That we may seek an administration of justice in our society that men will find your ways and recognize that the God of all the earth is the ultimate judge and will punish evil doers. We too stand under your punishment except for the cross of Jesus Christ who died for us. We pray also to give ourselves in meaningful ways to the care and ministry to the poor. Thank you for this land. Thank you for the privilege of citizenship in it. Bless our country. Guard it. Most of all Lord, we pray that in our citizenship in heaven we will live as befits your people in this world. For we eagerly wait for you to come again for us. In the name of our Lord. Amen.