

Christian Citizenship:

Romans 13

By Chuck LaMattina

Chicago, Illinois

The Bible teaches us that Christians are not a part of this world, even though we live in it. In his high priestly prayer, in John 17, Jesus Christ prayed for all who would believe in him saying, “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world (vs. 16).” And his prayer request for us was not that we would be taken out of this world but that God would keep us “from the evil one (vs. 15).”

In saying that we are not of this world Jesus meant that we are not bound to this life alone. We are not like the unbeliever, who is a one dimensional earth dweller, whose wisdom is faulty, and whose hopes rest only in what he or she can see, hear, smell, taste or touch, in this lifetime. As Christians we have the very life of God within us in the gift of the Spirit. We have available to us divine wisdom and strength for daily living. And we have a sure and certain hope of eternal life and glory in the coming kingdom of God. Philippians 3:20 says,

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ [All scripture is cited from the NKJV].

When Christ returns he will establish the kingdom of heaven, of which we are citizens, on this earth. There is a New World order coming!

Yet, even though we are not **of** this world, at this moment in time, we still live **in** it. And since we do there is a tension that comes into our lives concerning how to live as citizens of heaven, even while we are now citizens of some earthly government. In fact this was a problem that Christ faced when he ministered in Israel. At that time, most Israeli's chafed under the dominion of Roman rule. Many hoped to overthrow Rome and restore the Davidic kingdom.

In the light of this a delegation of Pharisees and Herodians (the religious and political elite of the day) went to Jesus to try and trap him in a controversial question. The question recorded in Matthew 22:17 was this:

“Tell us, therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

Their question was devilishly clever! If Christ answered, “No.” he would have been branded an insurrectionist – a rebel against Rome. If he answered “Yes.” He would have been seen by many as an enemy of God's people. Christ's enemies were sure they had him, but he had them instead.

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. And he said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar's.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” (vss. 18-21)

Christ's answer was brilliant and full of divine wisdom. With a single sentence our Lord made clear the power and rights of human governments, while at the same time limiting its power under God. There is a proper domain and function for civil government. But it must be seen in the light of the overall government of God.

Romans 13 explains to us how we as Christians are to relate to the worldly governments in which we find ourselves. The 13th chapter of Romans has been controversial to say the least. It has been used to prop up evil governments, and as a result attempts have been made to make the “governing authorities” that Paul writes of either church authorities or angelic powers. This has led to abuses as well! The truth is that the “governing authorities” dealt with in Romans 13 are the authorities of civil governments. As we study this section of God's Word in a biblically balanced way, we will receive great spiritual profit. Let's begin:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgement on themselves. (Romans 13:1, 2)

Christians are to be subject to the civil government in which they may find themselves, for

there is no right to rule except from God. In other words, government is not just a man-made institution; the idea of human government and authority comes from God. Civil governments are a means ordained by God for the right regulation of human affairs. Just as parents are to exercise authority in the home, and church leaders in the church, so civil governments are to exercise authority in public, community life.

Now, this is not to imply that all forms of government are intrinsically good, or that every government does the will of God in the best sense. But in an ultimate sense, the government's authority to rule comes from God. Psalm 62:11 says, "Power belongs to God" – Amen! All power does. Therefore no one can have any power to rule at all without God's ordaining of it, or permitting of it.

In the Old Testament book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar learned this the hard way. He thought that he ruled his vast empire because of his own greatness, but finally he was driven to his senses and he learned,

"That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses."
(Daniel 4:32)

We know also from Luke 4 that Satan can give kingdoms and power to those who serve him. Yet, even Satan's authority is subject to God's ruling and overruling. For example, in John 19, Jesus stood before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and Pilate says to Jesus,

"Do you not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?"
Jesus answered and said,

"You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above."
(vss. 10, 11)

The reason Christ answered Pilate as he did was his strong and accurate belief in God's sovereign rule in the affairs of men. Nothing exists apart from God's will. All things, ultimately trace their being back to God, including the power to govern.

Again, this does not mean that all governments are intrinsically good, or that every official does God's will in the best sense. God is not responsible for the sins of governments or civil officials any more than He is responsible for our

sins. But the right of governments to rule and to bring order and stability to public life is the will of God. In the best sense government is ordained of God for the benefit of humanity, for our common good. And since this is true, we as believers in Christ should be model citizens following the laws of the land and praying for our local, state, provincial, and national leaders. In fact this is stated elsewhere in the New Testament with great clarity.

Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak evil against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men – as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.

Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter 2:11-17).

And not only should we submit to the laws of our country, we should be praying for our leaders. In 1 Timothy 2, the apostle Paul writes,

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (vss. 1-4)

Notice that God's Word doesn't say, "Pray for the leaders you like" or even, "Pray for your leaders except those who are incompetent, or bad." No! In fact if we feel that our rulers are ungodly, this should

cause us to pray for them even more fervently! This principal of praying for our civil authorities is seen even in the Old Testament. When Israel was held in captivity in Babylon God said,

“Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.” (Jer. 29:7)

Now, let’s return to Romans 13 and look at the God-given tasks of good government.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. (vss. 3, 4)

From these two verses (as well as from 1 Peter 2:14) the most basic role of civil government is to support and promote and praise what is good and right. The government should help promote good civil virtues, they should keep the peace, and promote the common welfare of its citizens. Plus the civil authorities are to punish those who engage in evil acts against the community. The use of force to punish evil doers, or criminals is a God-given right. In a sense, the wrath of the state against evil, is a foretaste of God’s ultimate wrath against evil at the final judgement. Government is to be an instrument of justice that promotes what is good, protects the innocent, and punishes criminals.

The whole point here in Romans 13 is that God’s ideal for civil government is that it is to bring some form of harmony and peace and order to life. The state however, has no authority from God to terrorize or manipulate its people. It has no right to overturn longstanding moral standards and values. It has no right to change or overturn honorable institutions like marriage and the family. The state has no God-given right to declare what is moral. It only has the right to uphold the moral standards of God that are common to all. The state does not even have the ability, or the God-given right to reform evil doers. It only has the authority to punish them.

Therefore as long as the governing authorities exercises their power in keeping with God’s intent, they are God’s servants for the common good of society. If however the state runs counter to what is good and right you and I have the right and the moral obligation to disobey. Let me say this as clearly as I can – we as Christians are to submit to all civil law, except where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to the will of God.

For example, when Israel was in slavery in Egypt, the Bible says that the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, and they became very mighty (Exodus 1). But a new Pharaoh arrived on the scene who did not know the history of Joseph and Israel. So in an attempt to diminish Israel’s numbers and keep control, he afflicted them with heavy labor. But Israel grew and flourished. Finally, Pharaoh ordered the Jewish midwives to kill all the Jewish boys who were born. It was his version of planned population control! But Exodus 1:17 says,

But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive.

Another example is Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered everyone to fall down and worship his golden image, or be thrown in a fiery furnace. The three young men refused to obey the king even in the face of death. The same was true for Daniel. King Darius made a decree that for 30 days no petition or prayer could be made to any god, or man except to the king himself. Daniel disobeyed and kept his prayer time with God, and God delivered him from the lion’s den.

In the New Testament, in the book of Acts, chapter 4, Peter and John heal a man who had been crippled since his birth, and begin to preach Christ to the people. As news of this reaches the religious leaders in Jerusalem they have Peter and John arrested, and they threaten them with punishment should they continue to preach in Jesus’ name. Here’s their response:

But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” (vss. 18-20)

It is extremely important to understand that in each case of disobedience given as examples here, the purpose of these heroic refusals to obey the governing authorities, was not to just simply defy the government, but to demonstrate their submission to the higher laws of God! As Christians we have a divine right and a moral obligation to speak out against and oppose what is morally wrong, and to do what is right in order to correct what is wrong. Yet, the point remains that in general, we are to be good citizens and help support the government for the good it can do.

Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.

Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Romans 13:5-7)

By obeying the laws of the land we stay out of trouble, keep our conscience clear before God, and keep the doors open for the gospel of Christ. And yes, we should pay our taxes! If you have the right to oppose taxes before they become law, or if you have the right to repeal unfair taxes, then by all means do so. But you have no right to cheat on your taxes. And remember to give honor and respect to those in authority that deserve that respect because of their office. A government that does not have the respect of its people is doomed to impotence and it will ultimately collapse.

Loyalty and honor and respect for those in authority have more than sentimental value. If there is no respect for those who ought to receive respect like parents, teachers, judges, legislators, church leaders and so on, the public welfare stands in jeopardy! Our society today would not be as much of the jungle that it is if proper respect for authority was taught to our children. All of us must learn to respect those who are in authority whether it is in the home, the church, or the government.

It may be difficult to feel respect for officials whose standards or actions we do not support. But it will always be difficult to secure worthy leaders unless the community is at least prepared to regard those in government with the

respect to which they are entitled. If we teach our children the truth about honoring those in authority, they will come to understand that they themselves must strive to be worthy should they desire to hold positions of authority in the home and church or in government.

Finally, what Paul wrote in Romans 13 about our duty to the governing authorities of this world is only temporary! In verse 12 he says, "The night is far spent, the day is at hand." What day? The day of Christ's return and the establishment of the kingdom of God! That great day draws closer with each new morning. On that day Jesus Christ will be King of kings and Lord of lords, and believers will be in public office. That's right! We will help administer the justice and peace of the kingdom of God.

In the meantime our primary task as the church is not politics, but preaching the good news concerning Christ and the kingdom of God. To become obsessed with political success or failures, at the expense of bringing people to faith in Christ, is as foolish as a skilled heart surgeon abandoning his profession to become a make up artist, spending time making people look better, rather than saving lives. Only changed people change society. In the realm of civil authorities, its not so much that we need better institutions, as we need better men and women in those institutions. If we show ourselves as the salt and light of the world that we are, we can bring glory to God and good to His people.

[Chuck LaMattina is president of Grace Ministry USA and co-editor of *The Unity of the Spirit*. His books: *Christ our Life; Our Awesome God; The Gift of the Holy Spirit*; and *Devoted to God* may all be ordered from Grace Ministry USA, 7359 N. Hoyne, Chicago, IL. 60645 or by e-mail at: gracemusa@aol.com]