

## **Romans 13:1-7**

They tell us there are only two certainties in life—one is death, the other is taxes. Guess what Paul's talking about in Romans 13!

Before we get on to the issue of taxes, however, there's a lot of ground to cover in the first five verses—that's where Paul puts the focus on the Christian's response to government. How do we handle those who rule over us? What is our attitude to the powers that be? What is their prime role in society? Valid questions that Paul takes time to answer!

And, bearing in mind the situation which he found himself in, it makes these sound words of advice all the more meaningful—it gives them a lot of street credibility. This guy isn't rummaging around for something to say about government and its officials, he's upfront, he makes no bones about their responsibilities to the wider community—at the same time, he leaves us and them in no doubt as to their accountability, first and foremost, to God and then to the electorate.

God puts them there, and the population owe it to him and them to support them in their demanding role. Living as we do in a crazy, mixed-up world, these words are timely. They deserve a fair hearing! I believe we could save ourselves a lot of tension and heartache if we took on board what Paul is saying—we may not like it but, when all is said and done, this is the word of God! It seems to me these seven verses contain the clearest and most specific New Testament teaching on the Christian's responsibility to civil authority.

Before we get into the text, it's important for us to keep in mind that God is God, that he rules and reigns on high, that he is the supreme governor, that he is in charge! In every situation, the living God has the first word—but don't forget, he also has the last word! It also needs to be said that there is another principle of huge importance to God's people—a Christian's disobedience to the civil authority is justified when that authority requires him to disobey

God. We see that powerfully illustrated in two back-to-back sections in the book of Acts. We covered that issue in our series on Acts a few months back.

Even though they record different events, the issue they raise is pretty much the same: to whom does the Christian owe his total allegiance when the authority of God's word is challenged by the government of the day? The unequivocal answer, I believe, every time, is that the believer must obey God rather than man. You can check it out for yourself in Acts 4 and 5.

For me, there is no halfway house, it is either all or nothing—in instances like these, and they do raise their head occasionally, a Christian is duty bound to be a godly rebel!

I think we'll pause for a short music break and, when we come back, we'll see what Paul has to say on the issue of citizenship.

#### **MUSIC BREAK**

A good Christian is a good citizen! To me, that's the ethos, the heartbeat, of what Paul says in Romans 13. The story is told of a little boy who wrote to Santa Claus at the North Pole. The letter arrived instead at the office of the Postmaster General, who was touched by its content. The boy didn't want toys for Christmas, but rather food and clothing for his destitute family. The Postmaster General wrote to the little boy saying that Santa had referred the matter to him and enclosed \$50 as a gift from the North Pole.

The next year the Postmaster General received another letter addressed to Santa from the same boy, which read, 'Dear Santa, you were very kind to me last year, and I really appreciate it so much. But, next time, please don't send money through the government. You know those guys always keep half of what they get!'

Only a story but I reckon the boy's attitude is reflected in many adults today. Thankfully, Paul's not in that mould, he doesn't have that kind of warped mindset! If anything, Paul takes the issue of government very seriously and it shows when he writes in verse 1: 'Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for

there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.'

Paul lays the ground rules when he states that God has set the wheels in motion for men to be governed in today's world. The powers that be are ordained by God. I hinted a few minutes ago that it was particularly hard for Paul in his day—he lived in an era when the ruling party was not only secular, but brazenly idolatrous. The Caesars saw themselves as mini-gods and they expected Joe Public to worship them and treat them as such. It is hard to explain but it is with that kind of backdrop that Paul says what he does. The reality is and, for reasons best known to God himself, he allows men, even ungodly men, to come into positions of high authority. We have echoes of that in Daniel 4 and Proverbs 21:1. It is also true to say that God has the uncanny knack of giving the people the type of leadership they deserve! As a consequence, we need to be extremely cautious when opposing those who rule over us. God has them there for a purpose—his purpose.

In that light, I believe it is biblical to suggest that we are obliged to obey our leaders despite their personal or political opinions. We recognise them for who they are and we pray for them as they fulfil their role in government. We take a huge gamble when we oppose them for Paul declares in verse 2 that 'he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.'

That's fairly clear! It's tough talking from the apostle—the guy has no option but to raise the stakes. There were too many in his day who wanted to pull the plug on the government for one reason or another: Paul says that's a definite no-no! If we walk down that road, we may bring the government down, but we'll not help our own cause in the long term—God sees and knows all that happens on planet earth. The truth is, civil disobedience brings severe consequences!

It's easy to protest, it's easy to throw stones at those who hold public office, it's easy to fight against the status quo, it's easy to stir

up trouble and whip people into a frenzy—it may be easy to do all these things, but that doesn't make them right!

We'll pause for a short break and, when we come back, we'll see what Paul says about the unique role of rulers—they should have a positive effect on society.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Men and women in positions of authority are first and foremost ordained of God, that's the drift of verses 1 and 2; they are also designed to perpetrate good, we discover that in verses 3 and 4.

You will know as well as I do, it doesn't always seem like that! As they say, 'can you trust a politician?'

History shows that down through the years some horrendous things have taken place in our world—incidents where people's civil rights have been abused, there has been ethnic cleansing on a vast scale, we have read of the unleashing of death squads, and other atrocities.

We need to understand that God never, never condones such behaviour. Mind you, most governments who do such things do not last that long—they usually get their comeuppance. In the end, justice often prevails.

No earthly government is perfect—the people running the show are sinners, so what else can we expect. That doesn't negate them of their responsibility to do their best and do what is right. It is their prime role to ensure that law and order is effective and administered fairly throughout every level of society. It is their job to make life easier for the people so that they can live in relative peace and safety.

That's what Paul says in verse 3 – if we're on the right side of the law, we have nothing to fear from the authorities, it's when we get on the wrong side of the law that we have to worry! It is not meant to be a police state as such, but a place where people are treated without fear or favour. One of the main functions of any government is to ensure that justice is dispensed—hence the

reference in verse 4 to the 'sword' and 'an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer'.

We are never encouraged to take the law into our own hands; in Romans 13, there is no place for so-called kangaroo courts, nor is there any role for vigilantes! Let me say it again, the state is given the responsibility of vengeance, a responsibility explicitly forbidden to the individual Christian. God's way of dealing with evil is not by personal vendetta or vengeance, but through justice carried out by the state.

The alternative to good democratic government is either a dictatorship or chaotic anarchy! And, quite frankly, neither are desirable. I think the period of the judges in Old Testament history proves that, you only have to read the perceptive comment in Judges 21:25 to see what I mean—that's when Joe Public did what 'was right in his own eyes'.

In situations like that, might becomes right, and the law of the jungle prevails. It seems to me that the only thing worse than a bad government is no government.

Paul draws the threads together when he writes in verse 5 that 'it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.' In other words, it is God's will that we keep the law of the land, we are meant to be good and godly citizens. The fact is, if we break the law, we pay the price, and rightly so; however, if we keep the law, we have nothing to fear.

A good conscience is a wonderful bonus, it means we can sleep on our bed at night, it means we can look our God in the eye as there are no skeletons hanging in the closet. A good conscience means we are doing what God wants us to do and we are what God wants us to be!

Before we move on to the next section, I think it's worth noting how Paul describes government leaders in verse 4—he uses the phrase 'God's servant'. That word for servant is the word from which we get our English word 'deacon'. In that unique sense, a government

is the deacon of God and, as with any deacon, its job is to humbly serve. That surely implies that, whether the government realises it or not, they serve God. In that sense, all public servants represent a divine institution as well as a human mission.

We'll pause for a short music break and, when we come back, I want us to see what Paul has to say about taxes!

### **MUSIC BREAK**

This is not the time to turn off your radio or telly—yes, we're talking about taxes and most of us usually cringe at this point. Let Paul speak for himself in verses 6 and 7: 'This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.'

This is where Paul's teaching really hits hard—it touches your pocket and mine! It was no different for the people in Paul's day. They had the same responsibilities resting on them as we have today—we have to pay our way in society! That's the bottom line!

Paul spells it out in easy to understand language—he appeals to the heart and mind. He reminds us that government is God's idea and God's servant and, because of that, we should have a healthy, upbeat attitude towards it. We may not like some of the things they do, but it could be worse. Much worse!

Those who find themselves in such positions of leadership are supposed to put everything into it – what they do is not for their own good or ego, it's for the benefit of the people, or at least it should be! Paul reminds us that this is not a part time position, it is full time! If they're going to do it right and do it well, it's going to take a lot of time.

Paul elaborates on his thinking in verse 7 when he encourages us to embrace a positive attitude to such things. The fact is, we are under obligation in two ways—first of all, to God, and then, to those who rule over us!

As Christians we may deplore the politics of a particular person in office. We may be repelled by his scandalous conduct. But that does not disallow us from respecting the office. The man in the hot seat is just a human being, but the office exists at the discretion of God. Even if we dissent, we must always be men and women who act as born again believers.

Let me say this in closing: when it comes to government we need to remember that it is divinely appointed, it is a deacon to meet our needs, and we see it for what it is.

I was touched when I read the story of one pastor who, when it became clear that the Nazis were pursuing their terrible racist policies continued to preach biblical truth and, as a result, was thrown into prison. When the prison chaplain visited Pastor Martin Niemoller in his cell, he asked him: 'What brings you here? Why are you in prison?' To which the pastor angrily replied: 'And, brother, why are you not in prison?'

That's the spirit of Paul's theology in Romans 13—for you and me, life is a divine calling! Two lessons emerge: number one, we are to obey God always; and, number two, we are to obey the government usually!