



# The Christian And Civil Authority – Part 1

**“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1).**

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“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. 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, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. 5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. 6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour” (Romans 13:1-7).

## INTRODUCTION

Romans 13:1–7 is one of the clearest passages in Scripture concerning the relationship between the Christian and civil government. The Apostle Paul wrote these words to believers living under the Roman Empire. The Roman authorities were not a Christian government. Indeed, the Roman system would eventually become responsible for the persecution and execution of many Christians.

Yet Paul did not tell Christians to live as rebels, agitators or anarchists. Instead, he instructed them to recognise legitimate authority, obey the law, pay what is due, and show proper honour to those in positions of governmental responsibility. This does **not** mean that everything a government does is automatically approved by God, nor does it mean that Christians must obey a government when it commands them to disobey God.

The Bible teaches both **submission to legitimate authority** and **obedience to God above every earthly authority**. We therefore need to understand Romans 13 carefully and in the context of the whole counsel of Scripture.

**The Key Theme Is:** The Christian's responsibility towards civil authority

**The Key Thought Is:** God is a God of order and authority. Christians are called to respect and obey legitimate civil authority, not because every ruler is righteous, but because God has established the principle of government for the restraint of evil and the preservation of order. At the same time, our ultimate allegiance remains to God.

## 1. GOD IS THE SOURCE AND AUTHOR OF ORDERLY AUTHORITY

**Romans 13:1:** "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." Paul begins with a fundamental principle: **"There is no power but of God."** God is sovereign over human history. Government and civil authority do not exist outside His knowledge or sovereignty. This principle is established throughout Scripture, For example:

- **Daniel 2:21** "And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings..."
- **Daniel 4:17** "...the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will..."
- **Proverbs 8:15–16** "By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth."

The Bible therefore does not present government as inherently evil. God created human beings with a need for order, responsibility and accountability. Where there is no authority whatsoever, society quickly degenerates into disorder.

Imagine a busy road junction where every driver decides that nobody has authority to tell him when to stop.

- One driver says, "I have my freedom."
- Another says, "Nobody can tell me what to do."
- Another says, "I will go whenever I want."

What happens? Freedom without order quickly becomes danger. Traffic lights restrict certain actions, but that restriction serves a greater purpose: **the protection and orderly movement of everyone**. Likewise, legitimate civil authority imposes restrictions upon individual behaviour for the sake of public order.

## 2. RESISTING LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY IS A SERIOUS MATTER

**Romans 13:2** "Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." Paul makes the matter very serious. To resist legitimate authority merely because we dislike authority is contrary to God's principle of order. This does not mean that every government action is righteous. Scripture contains numerous examples of rulers who were wicked. But the existence of imperfect rulers does not abolish the biblical principle of legitimate authority.

- **Titus 3:1** "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work."
- In **1 Peter 2:13–14**, Peter gives the same principle: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well."

Notice the reason Peter gives: **"for the Lord's sake."** Our submission to legitimate authority is ultimately an expression of our submission to God. We do not obey merely because we fear punishment. We obey because we recognise God's principle of order.

## 3. THE PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT IS TO RESTRAIN EVIL AND PROTECT GOOD

**Romans 13:3–4** "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain..." Paul describes civil authority as having a legitimate function. Government is intended to:

1. Restrain evil.
2. Punish wrongdoing.

3. Protect society.
4. Promote public order.
5. Recognise and encourage what is good.

Paul calls the governing authority: **"the minister of God to thee for good."** This does not necessarily mean that the individual ruler is personally a servant of God in the spiritual sense. Rather, God can use civil institutions—even imperfect ones—to accomplish His purposes of restraining evil and maintaining order.

### **GOVERNMENT HAS A GOD-GIVEN RESPONSIBILITY TO DEAL WITH EVIL**

The Bible does not teach that society should simply tolerate lawlessness.

- **Ecclesiastes 8:11** "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." When wrongdoing has no consequences, people become emboldened to do more wrong. That is why the rule of law matters.
- **Proverbs 29:4** "The king by judgment establisheth the land: but he that receiveth gifts overthroweth it." Good government promotes justice. Bad government promotes corruption.
- **Isaiah 1:17** "Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." Government therefore has a moral responsibility to administer justice.

### **4. CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT LIVE IN FEAR OF AUTHORITY WHEN THEY ARE DOING WHAT IS RIGHT**

**Romans 13:3** "Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same." Paul's principle is simple: **Live righteously, obey the law, and you should have no reason to fear legitimate authority.** The Christian should be known as a person of integrity.

- **1 Peter 2:12** "Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." Our conduct should give unbelievers no legitimate reason to accuse us of wrongdoing.
- **Philippians 2:15** "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world."

The Christian should be a good citizen. We should not be known for: dishonesty; tax evasion; lawlessness; violence; fraud; corruption; disorder; deliberate disregard for legitimate laws. Instead, we should demonstrate righteousness in our daily lives.

### **5. SUBMISSION TO AUTHORITY IS NOT THE SAME AS BLIND OBEDIENCE**

**This is an important qualification.** Romans 13 cannot legitimately be interpreted to mean: **"Whatever the government commands, Christians must obey."** The Bible itself gives us examples where God's people respectfully refused commands that contradicted God's Word.

- **The Hebrew midwives.** Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill the male children. **Exodus 1:17** "But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive." Their ultimate allegiance was to God.
- **Daniel's three friends.** Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to worship the golden image. They refused. **Daniel 3:16–18** "O

Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace... But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." They respected the king's authority, but they would not worship the king's idol.

- **The Apostles.** The Jewish authorities commanded Peter and John not to preach in the name of Jesus. Their response was: **Acts 4:19–20** "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." Later, Peter and the other apostles were commanded again to stop preaching. **Acts 5:29** "We ought to obey God rather than men."

This is the governing principle: **When human authority commands what God forbids, we obey God. When human authority forbids what God commands, we obey God.** However, we should never use this principle as an excuse for ordinary rebelliousness. There is a vast difference between **biblical conscientious obedience to God** and **personal resistance to authority because we dislike being governed.**

## 6. THE CHRISTIAN'S SUBMISSION SHOULD BE MOTIVATED BY CONSCIENCE, NOT MERELY FEAR

**Romans 13:5** "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." This is one of the most important verses in the passage. Paul gives two motivations:

- **"for wrath"** — because wrongdoing brings punishment; and
- **"for conscience sake"** — because we recognise that obedience to legitimate authority is morally right.

A Christian should not obey the law only because there is a police officer nearby. Our character must be stronger than our fear of being caught.

Suppose you arrive at a red traffic light late at night. There are no pedestrians, no other cars and no police officers anywhere nearby. Why should you stop?

- A person whose only concern is punishment may say: "There is nobody here. I can go through."
- But a person governed by conscience says: "The law is there, and I will obey it whether or not somebody is watching."

That illustrates Paul's teaching. **Christian character does what is right even when there is no immediate consequence for doing wrong. Proverbs 15:3 says that** "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good." God is always watching.

## 7. CHRISTIANS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO PAY WHAT THEY OWE

**Romans 13:6–7** "For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour." Paul specifically addresses financial obligations. Christians are not to evade legitimate taxes and financial obligations simply because they dislike the government. Jesus taught the same principle. **Matthew 22:17–21** The Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. Jesus replied: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that

are God's." There is an important distinction here. We have obligations towards human government. But we also have obligations towards God. **Caesar must receive what belongs to Caesar, but God must receive what belongs to God.** This means that paying taxes does not replace our responsibility to serve God.

### **8. CHRISTIANS SHOULD GIVE HONOUR WHERE HONOUR IS DUE**

**Romans 13:7** "Render therefore to all their dues... fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour." Christianity does not teach contempt for authority. We can disagree with a government policy without becoming personally abusive towards those in authority. **1 Timothy 2:1–2** "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority..." Notice Paul's response to government:

- Pray for them.
- Not merely complain about them.
- Not merely criticise them.
- Not merely curse them.
- **Pray for them.**

Why? "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."