

must obey God first, but part of obeying God is to be the best citizens we can be and to submit to the government that is over us.

For an early example, remember Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin accused them of blasphemy for teaching that Jesus was the Messiah. They were beaten and commanded not to preach in Jesus' name anymore. What was their response to that governing body? *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."* (Acts 4:19,20) The thoroughly Jewish Sanhedrin could hardly say that Peter and John should obey them rather than God. Their mistake was to believe that they spoke for God and Peter and John did not. Still, we see in Peter and John's response their understanding that God is still the final authority and is to be obeyed above all others. In our submission to government we are not to disobey God or sin. Apart from things that are sinful, however, we are to be in submission to the government. If we can obey the law without disobeying God, then we must obey the law.

One more thing needs to be addressed before we move on. Another difficult aspect of this passage is how we are to reconcile the truth that all authority is established by God with the totally depraved and evil regimes we have seen throughout history. Does Paul actually mean to say that it was God who put Nero in power, or the Pharaoh who enslaved the Hebrews, or Nebuchadnezzar, or Hitler, or Stalin, or Saddam Hussein? The answer is yes. God is not guilty of the

barbaric acts that have been done by governments over the millenia, but God is responsible for placing them in power. God both blesses and curses. As we saw a couple of months ago, God shows mercy to those to whom He has decided to show mercy and He hardens in their sin those whom He chooses to harden. We cannot thank God for the wonderful blessings, and government, we enjoy without also acknowledging that He also established the evil regimes. God works to remind us of His sovereignty and power. He is jealous of His name and does not tolerate the worship of anything other than Him, because He alone is God and He alone is to be worshiped. This is not arrogant or an usurpation of a position that does not belong to Him. It is a recognition of reality. He made us. He alone is God. He alone is to be worshiped. That is reality. For God to tolerate the worship of anything or anyone else would be a lie and a denial of who He is. God works in our world to draw sinful humanity back to Himself, and to punish those who will not be drawn. Time and again He uses human governments as His tools to both show us the depravity of the human heart and to punish sin. If nothing else, the 11 million people murdered by Hitler's regime, and the 30 million or so who died under Stalin point out to us how evil we still are after nearly 2000 years of the church's influence and how much we need the correction of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is not thinking of the extremes of evil, and the truth is that most governments over time have not been devoted to the destruction of the people under their charge. After all, even the most incompetent and self-serving king or politician realizes that if he destroys

everybody or ruins too many lives there will not be enough left for him to collect the taxes he wants. Most governments have been more or less competent, and at least willing to allow the people some freedom to live and prosper. To rebel against the government is to rebel against what God has set up and invites God's judgement. God is not an **anarchist**, nor does He tolerate anarchists. From His perspective, government is good.

To help us understand this, Paul went on. *“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good.”* (vv.3,4) God places rulers in power, not to terrorize those who do right, but to limit, correct, and stop those who do wrong. Rulers are to put laws in place that allow the society to function and protect the people under their charge. Most rulers do this, with varying degrees of success. We have already seen Paul's command to live at peace with everybody as much as we can. This fits with doing what is right, good, and best for the community. In short, we are to be good **citizens** and neighbors. In the vast majority of countries around the world and throughout history following those recommendations will prevent all kinds of trouble. Submit to the government. Be kind to the people around you. Government has a job to do in protecting you and providing an environment in which you can work, earn money, and pay your taxes. Submit to it.

What, however, if we do not? How does Paul say God sees the government's role when we will not

submit? *“But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”* (v.4) Just as the government will probably not interfere with you if you work hard, live a good life, and submit to the law, the government will probably punish you for not submitting and not being a good neighbor. If you do wrong, the government is one of God's primary means of punishing you. Paul even says that the government does not bear the sword for nothing. Physical force is expected from a government seeking to keep its people in peace with one another and submitted to the law. One of the primary roles of government, if not the primary role, is to **protect** the citizens and their property, both from outside attack and from each other. Toward that end, God has authorized the use of force, even deadly force. The government works as God's agent in punishing as least some sin.

So, God establishes governments for our good to both provide protection and to punish those who do evil. Paul adds, *“Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”* (v.5) We have two reasons to submit to the government. The first is that we rightly fear the punishment if we do not. If we do wrong, the government will punish us, so we have a motive to do right instead. The other reason is our consciences. In writing to the church, Paul is assuming that we are in Christ, and that the Holy Spirit dwells in our regenerated hearts. We have been renewed by the cleansing of our souls and we are now holy and righteous, blameless before God. Why, then, would we want to sin, and

compound that sin by breaking the law as well? Most laws are good laws that are here for our benefit. God calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Our consciences dictate that we cannot then break laws and hurt those around us. God wants us to be at peace and to be good citizens, and the Holy Spirit, if we have the Holy Spirit, works in us to want that as well.

Paul closes this section on government by writing, *“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 honor, then honor.”* (vv.6,7) Even taxes are a good thing in that they support the government and enable it to work. It is not an evil that the government collects money from the citizens each year. It is a necessity if the society is going to function. Part of submitting to government includes paying your taxes. Listen, you cannot be both a follower of Christ and a **tax** cheat. We may not like paying taxes and fees, but they are part of keeping our society running and it is not only illegal but also a sin to avoid paying them. God will hold you accountable and His balance sheets are never off.

Paul is following Jesus here who also taught His disciples to pay their taxes. Indeed, Jesus argued that, as God’s Son, He should have been exempt from the Temple Tax, yet He paid the tax anyway, sending Peter to get it from the mouth of a fish. We are expected by God to give our taxes, our fees, and our respect to those who have been given positions of authority over us to protect us and our society and to create an environment in which we can live, work, and earn a living.

This passage has an interesting aspect in the United States. We are a representative democracy. We not only live under the authority of our government, we have a voice in choosing who sits in the offices where the decisions are made. As president Lincoln put it so well, we have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The final political authority in the United States is the people. We get the individuals we elect and we live with the consequences of the choices we make in the voting booth. God still directs the outcome of the elections and is the final authority over who will be in office. Still, we are among the first in history to share in the responsibility of how our government functions and what it chooses to do. We must vote wisely and with God’s desire and direction in mind.

Pray for the people in government. Be a good citizen, obeying God first and always, and submitting to the law when doing so does not require you to disobey God (which is almost always). Pay your taxes and support the valid, proper work of government. In the United States, we also need to add to this list, vote and seek leaders who will provide the freedom to live as God desires, who will strengthen opportunities to work and support ourselves and one another, and who will keep government in its proper role so it may be God’s servant to do good and not harm.