

“GOOD CITIZENS”

Studies in Romans – 16

Romans 13:1-7 (p. 1101)

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,” wrote Paul in chapter 12, *“but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* And with that challenge Paul opened this final section of his letter to the Romans. You’ll remember that in chapter 12 the underlying question was this: How are Christians to maintain their integrity while living in a secular society? Here in chapter 13 the question is: How are Christians to relate to that society? In particular, what ought to be the Christian’s attitude toward civil authority as it relates to God’s authority. So for our purposes we’re going to focus our attention today mainly on the first seven verses of chapter 13.

Paul didn’t waste any time getting to the point. Remember, he was writing to Christians when he said: *“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”* That sounds fairly categorical, doesn’t it? Wherever you live, Christians are expected to be good citizens – period!

But how do you square that with the way he began the last chapter: *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world.”* At first reading those two quotes seem confusing if not downright contradictory. Taken at face value, in chapter 12 Paul seemed to be advocating an attitude of stubborn non-compliance with a world that’s trying to make you behave in a particular way. Yet in chapter 13 he seems to be calling for a kind of blanket, blind submission to all governing authorities on the grounds that God established them in the first place. Those two attitudes appear mutually exclusive. So what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to be Christian non-conformists – challenging what the world tells us to do; or are we supposed to give in to any and all civil authorities?

I believe the Bible doesn’t contradict itself. I also believe in the integrity of Paul’s theology. So there must be something more to what he was saying; and we’re simply going to have to dig a little deeper to understand what Paul is getting at. Now it seems clear from everything he’s written thus far in this letter that Paul expects Christians to stay in the society in which they live. He hasn’t left room for escapism. But at the same time he expects Christians to be developing a faith that is so resilient that they end up transforming their society.

But how do you do that? How can you hold on to your Christian principles and at the same time obey the civil authorities – especially when those civil authorities are fundamentally anti-Christian? (Keep in mind the Edict of Toleration that legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire wouldn't be issued until the year 312.) So what was Paul getting at when he told these Roman Christians to “*submit themselves to the governing authorities?*”

A basic rule of Bible study is this: When in doubt, go to the source. That is: study the text itself, rather than what someone says about those words. Well, when we do that, we get an interesting clue from the actual words Paul used. In the first place, the word translated “submit” in verse 1 is the same Greek word we find throughout Paul's letters, and in particular in Ephesians 5:21. Paul was speaking there to both husbands and wives when he wrote: “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” The word he used is “*hupotassesthai.*” And perhaps the most significant feature of the submission of which Paul was speaking there is that it is mutual. “*Submit to one another,*” he wrote. Then he went on to spell out what that meant. “*Wives, honor your husbands. Husbands, be willing to die for your wives.*” That kind of submission only works when it's reciprocal – when it works both ways. Now, apply that same reasoning to Paul telling us to “submit to governing authorities,” and what he's saying (without even having to say it) is that those in authority must also be willing to “submit” to those whom they govern. It has to work both ways; otherwise this kind of submission simply doesn't work.

In fact, in verse 4 Paul calls the person in authority a “servant.” The word he uses there is “*diakonos*” (deacon). In order for submission to authority to work the way it's supposed to, the one in authority needs to have a servant mentality. So when those in authority fail to act with respect and concern for those they're governing, they have no business expecting the kind of submission that Paul is calling for here.

Granted, some civil authorities are strong enough to force people to obey them. But I don't believe that's the sort of submission Paul is advocating here. The ideal he's holding up here is an attitude of mutual service, reciprocal responsibility, two-way accountability. That kind of submission to civil authority leaves room for loyal opposition, for civil disobedience, for challenging those in authority when they're out of line. In short, that is how submission is supposed to work.

That being said, Paul nevertheless has some strong words of caution here, both for those who are expected to submit to civil authority as well as those who wield that authority. First, Christians who might at times balk at being subject to civil authority would do well to recall the case Paul made early on in this letter. We live in a sinful, broken world. And because sin is a problem that every last one

of us struggles with, people (and that includes Christian people) end up doing all sorts of nasty things to each other.

Now, admitting our common sinful human condition, if you and I want to live in a relatively civilized world – one in which people don't go around doing whatever they want, whenever they want, to whomever they want to do it – we need some restraint. And history's sad lesson is that trusting people to practice self-restraint doesn't work. We need law; we need governing; we need those people in positions of authority, even though they sometimes have to resort to making us behave ourselves out of fear of punishment.

That's certainly not the way God designed things in the beginning. But the alternative to authority is anarchy, and that leads to chaos. So Paul reminds us here that we owe a debt of respect to those in authority who try to keep society from destroying itself. And Christians should understand that better than anyone – because we know that when left to our own devices, we consistently manage to mess up our lives.

At the same time, to those who are in positions of civil authority, Paul reminds them that they have “*no authority except that which God has established.*” In other words, they have power – sometimes great power. But they had better never forget that their authority is theirs only because God allows them to have it. And if they ignore that fact, they do so at their own risk. Civil servants are God's servants, whether they recognize it or not. And one day they will have to answer for how they exercised their authority.

Karl Barth, an evangelical theologian and critic of the Nazi regime, used a concept from mathematics to show how the authority of the state is subject to the greater authority of God. He wrote: “*The state has its task to perform, but its weight is measurable, limited, penultimate. The society of man... is dependent upon the Creator for its meaning. Think of the state as a series of real and necessary numbers, each with value yet within a parenthesis. e.g., $\pm(8-4+7-5)$ In mathematics, all of the values of numbers and their relationships are decisively determined by the plus or minus sign that stands outside of the parenthesis and which is prior to it. So it is with the state.*” Those who govern best are those who know that they, themselves, are governed by God.

According to Paul, then, Christians are expected to respect those in authority. They are to submit to them, given the mutual responsibility between those who govern and those who are governed. And when that authority is exercised with wisdom and care, there is great reason to rejoice. I am so thankful to have been born in a country that, despite its flaws and mistakes, calls itself back, again and again to its fundamental commitment to pursue and protect the rights of all people. To have been born an American, to me, is no accident. It's a precious gift of God.

Nevertheless, when people who exercise authority abuse the power of their office, when mutual submission is no longer possible, Christians have a moral obligation to challenge that abuse. Paul is talking here about a strategy for Christians who are called to live in a society that may or may not share their values.

Now let's be more specific. Let's assume that you are a Christian and you're committed to being a good citizen and a positive influence on the society in which you live. I would suggest that a key question you have to ask yourself is this: How can I have the greatest positive impact on the society around me for Jesus Christ?

At a time when respect for authority is at low ebb, you can find all sorts of people, liberal and conservative, taking pot shots at whoever is currently in charge. They'll gripe about anything that doesn't fit their political agenda or they find personally distasteful. Now, while this sort of approach may occasionally expose flaws in the system, it generally breeds distrust and does little to heal.

If I understand the implications of Paul correctly here as to what it means to be good citizens, then of all people, Christians need to be very careful that any time they challenge the governing authorities, it had better be a matter of conscience that is biblically sound, that has been committed to soul-searching prayer, and is then offered with profound humility. None of us is above the law.

I see profound wisdom in Paul telling Christians to habitually give the support due to those exercising governing authority, and I'll tell you why. When good Christian citizens who routinely submit to the governing authorities are finally moved by conscience to oppose those authorities, their opposition will stand out in such striking contrast to the way they usually act that people will take note. The kind of criticism of civil authority that carries credible weight and can do much good comes from those who show respect for those in authority, but who never forget that there is One who is above the law – and to whom they owe ultimate allegiance.

On Thursday evening December 1, 1955, after a long day of work as a seamstress in a Montgomery, Alabama department store, Rosa Parks boarded a city bus to go home. Tired as she was, Mrs. Parks walked past the first few, mostly empty, rows of seats marked "Whites Only." It was against the law for an African American like her to sit in those seats. She finally settled for a spot in the middle of the bus. Black people were allowed to sit in this section as long as no white person was standing. Though Rosa Parks hated the segregation laws, and has been fighting for civil rights at the NAACP for more than 10 years, until that day she has never been one to break rules.

The bus continued along its route. After several more stops the bus was full. The driver noticed that all the seats in the "Whites Only" section were taken, and

that more white people had just climbed aboard. He ordered the people in Mrs. Parks' row to move to the back of the bus, where there were no open seats. No one budged at first. But when the driver barked at the black passengers a second time, they all got up... except for Rosa Parks; and a movement began that changed the character of this great nation.

Evidently those Christians in Rome to whom Paul was writing took to heart his admonition to be "good citizens." I say that because when the day came when they refused to proclaim, "Caesar is Lord" and were tortured and killed because of their civil disobedience, their martyrdom had a profound and permanent impact on world history. And it wasn't just because of their courage. Their faithful witness began to turn the world right side up because they took Jesus at his word and gave to Caesar what was Caesar's, and gave to God what is God's. And if you or I should ever be called on to take such a stand, I pray God will grant us the grace to do the same.

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