

ROMANS – LIVING BY FAITH
LOVING GOD AND LIVING GODLY – Chapters 12-14

LESSON 46 – CIVIL OBEDIENCE – Romans 13:1-7

We are continuing to answer the question, “What does a person look like who’s presented themselves as a living sacrifice to God?” Unfortunately, we have become a society that has grown comfortable with a certain level of disobedience to the government. Paul tackles this subject and tells us that to disobey the government is to disobey God.

God has established three primary institutions for governing society...the home...the church...and government. When functioning properly, they should never be in conflict with each other. Jesus actually supported all three of these institutions. His enemies tried to get Him trapped between them...supporting one while condemning another but that never worked. In fact, Jesus responded to the Pharisees in Matthew 22:21 by saying, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” Jesus affirmed the validity of human government but not without limits. These verses from Romans 13 can be viewed as Paul’s commentary on what Jesus said concerning government.

The Duty of Civil Obedience

Paul gives us this fundamental premise in verse 1, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities...” It is the Christian’s responsibility to be submissive to the governing authorities that are in place. Paul gave instructions to both Timothy and Titus and Peter wrote a similar message to the Jewish believers who were scattered and living under all sorts of secular rulers. Our obedience to our civil government is an expression of our obedience to God. Even when the Jews were taken captive in the Old Testament, God expected them to be obedient. Jeremiah 29:7, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” God always wants His people to pray for their civil authorities.

The Dominion of Civil Obedience

In Acts 17, Paul pointed out to the Greek philosophers that it is God who established the governments of the world. Acts 17:26, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” Everything is under God’s control. The simple truth is... we need human government because of the sin of mankind. If these authority structures were not in place, mankind would run wild across the face of the earth.

So what about evil rulers? John Phillips shared this, “Governments may be weak or strong, just or oppressive, benevolent or cruel, wise or foolish, but in each case, God has His way and moves His own plans forward. Nations come and go but behind all of them is God, overruling in the affairs of men.”

The Defiance of Civil Obedience

What happens if we choose to defy civil authorities? Paul says we choose to bring judgment on ourselves. Disobeying the government is disobeying God. He is the ultimate ruler over all earthly rulers. He sets up kings and takes them down according to His will. To resist the governing authorities is to resist God and His purposes on the earth.

The Definition of Civil Obedience

Paul says that governments have been established for two reasons...to protect the community and to punish the criminal. Governments have been ordained to protect those who live within its laws. More than once Paul used his Roman citizenship to protect himself. Otherwise he would have had no justice by those who wanted to persecute him.

Think about what would happen in our community if there was no local government or police...if there were no laws and no one to enforce them. It would be like the Wild West when people took the law into their own hands. Now...I am fully aware of the limitations of our human government. But even with their corruption and failure to protect the righteous, we are better off with them than without them.

The second function of government is to punish evil doers. Because mankind is sinful, it takes the fear of punishment to motivate us to obey the law. We may not like the government and yes...it's not always right; but the alternative would be far worse.

The Dynamic of Civil Obedience

There is actually a higher motivation than the fear of punishment for Christians to obey the government...the motivation of the Holy Spirit's presence. The Holy Spirit also keeps us tuned in to the will of God so we know when the laws of government contradict the laws of God. In those cases, we must obey the law of God. Peter and the other apostles were told to stop preaching the Gospel which of course, contradicted what Jesus told them to do. They responded by saying, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" The Christian's highest authority is God, and the laws of mankind must be disobeyed if they go against God's laws.

The Dynamic of Civil Obedience

Paul uses a simple and clear illustration here that we can definitely relate to in our day...paying taxes. We are to pay our taxes honestly and on time. Some say they're not going to pay part or all of their taxes because they don't like what the government is doing with the money. That is wrong...it is disobedience to God's commands. You work hard for your money and you may not like to give such a large amount of it to the government every year, but Scripture is clear that we must obey the law and pay our taxes.

We will not have a perfect government until Jesus returns and establishes His own government on earth. Until then, we have to live under a secular government that we don't always agree with but we must understand that we cannot be in fellowship with God and avoid fulfilling our other responsibilities.

The Dynamic of Civil Obedience

Paul's conclusion is similar to what Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." Christians have allowed culture to influence our thinking. We begin to get fuzzy around the edges of our thinking. We begin to let the world squeeze us into its mold and we start thinking it's ok to break the law...but it isn't. Christians should be the ones setting the example and living in submission to our government.

In addition to monetary support, we are also responsible for moral support of our government. Paul says we owe respect to those in authority over us. It's really amazing that Paul was writing these words to Christians in Rome who lived under some of the most immoral and unjust rulers in history. He says that Christians are to respect those in positions of governmental authority. To honor them is to honor God...to disrespect or disobey them is to disrespect or disobey God. How is our attitude?