

“Did God Really Say: Respect the Government?”

What I am going to say may come as a surprise to many. If you haven't heard it before or thought about it before, it might even seem a little shocking, especially coming just days after July 4. Here it is: the American Revolution was a sin. The people who rebelled against their government at the time in order to start a new nation were sinning by doing so.

Now, please don't think that I am trying to be unpatriotic. I'm not. I am so very thankful for the many blessings that we enjoy here in the United States of America. As you will hopefully notice, I believe that it is a good thing to be patriotic and to think highly of the country in which we live. Nor am I somehow disappointed in anyone who celebrated Independence Day. I celebrated along with my family. I celebrated what God accomplished even through sinful human events and the fact that it currently means freedom for me and many whom I love.

But I realize that to accuse the founding fathers of the United States with this sin could be surprising or even shocking to many. Of course, our purpose today is not to discuss or to debate sins that took place well over 200 years ago. Today we are going to consider a somewhat related sin that I believe is incredibly common today, that of disrespecting our leaders. The question before us this morning is, “Did God really say ‘Respect the government?’” And you've probably recognized already that indeed that is what God says in his Word. So perhaps the better question is, “If God really said that, why do God's people so often fail to listen?”

One of Scripture's most comprehensive passages regarding the Christian and government is our sermon text from Romans 13. This section from Romans is in the part of the book where the Apostle Paul gives some specific directions to the Romans regarding how to apply their Christian faith to particular aspects of their lives. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul makes it very clear that a Christian living out his faith will not rebel against the government. And this is based on a sometimes surprising fact: all earthly authorities are established by God.

Scripture really couldn't be more clear about this fact: **“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. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”** All earthly authorities have been established by God. That means that even the Roman leaders who persecuted Christians—and remember that this was going on by the time Paul wrote this letter—were established in their positions by God. That means that even today's leaders from political parties that are different from our own, who were elected by people with different views than those we hold, were put in their positions by God.

And it also means that God stands behind these earthly leaders. The way that we act toward them, the way that we treat them ultimately is the way that we are treating our God who established them.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that God has some expectations regarding how we treat the authorities. We are to submit, that is to obey and to place ourselves under their leadership, and not to rebel. That explains my contention about the American Revolution. Moreover, we are to pay taxes to support the work of the government, and we are to give our leaders the honor and respect due to their position.

So, how are we doing? Perhaps your experience is different than mine, but it troubles me to see how many, including close friends, and including myself, act in respect to our leaders. How willingly do you pay your taxes, remembering that doing so is in accord with God's will? How often do you stand

up for a government official when others are ridiculing or berating him? I don't see many people seeking to outright rebel against our government, or suggesting widespread disobedience. But what I often see is at best a grudging obedience. I see all sorts of disrespect, slander, and making fun of those in authority. And it really doesn't make much difference whether it is done in person or online in venues like facebook. The sort of language that people who call themselves Christian sometimes use to describe leaders is appalling. The sort of behavior that many display would be sinful in any situation, but they sometimes forget that when that behavior is aimed at a leader established in that position by God.

So we turn to Jesus. We look to him for a righteousness that comes not from our behavior, not from our keeping of the law, but through faith in our Savior. We look to Jesus and find someone who always treated earthly authorities with the respect and honor they were due. We don't often consider this aspect of Jesus' life. We think quickly of how he showed love to sinners, how he healed the sick and cast demons out of those possessed. We rightly spend much time dwelling on Christ's death for the sins of the world and his resurrection from the dead. But we should not pass quickly over Christ's life in our place. In every way, he maintained his perfection and innocence, even in his obedience to earthly authorities.

Consider today's Gospel from Matthew 22. Sure, the main point was that his enemies were trying to trap him. But Jesus didn't just come up with some fancy way to sidestep their question. He made a point. We should give to Caesar, or to any other earthly authority, what is expected of us. We should pay our taxes that we owe and should direct our respect toward those in authority over us. At the same time, we will give to God what is God's. And that's everything. Even our obedient service to earthly authorities is service to God because he stands behind them and set them in place.

Throughout his life, Jesus was obedient to the earthly authorities under whom he lived, right to the end of his life, when he humbly endured even the abusive misuse of their authority as they condemned and executed him.

So it is Christ's obedience on which we depend, not ours. Our heavenly Father is satisfied with us because Christ's obedience is ours through faith. Our disrespect and dishonor have been forgiven.

And we want to follow Christ's example. As forgiven children of God, we consider carefully our words and actions. We monitor our behavior regarding the authorities and the language that we use concerning them. We remind ourselves that paying taxes is our duty and that it is done to God's glory in support of his representatives. We do these things because God tells us that they are the right things to do, the things that please him. Paul writes, **"it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience"** When our consciences are sharpened and directed by God's Word, they testify that God really did say that the government deserves our obedience and respect.

And there are additional benefits to our Christ-like behavior in this area. This is letting our light shine. Our behavior may serve as a witness to others. It may give us an opportunity to share with them not only our thoughts about politics and government, but even more importantly, our knowledge of the world's Savior, Jesus Christ. Instead of turning people off with our rude talk or alienating others who could benefit from hearing the gospel or attending our church, we can be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world, both by our words and by our actions.

Many things have changed since the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. The government under which he and his original readers lived has passed through history. Many forms of government have been instituted, including democratically elected forms like the ones we now know. But some things have not changed. All governing authorities have been established by God and therefore demand our respect. We know it because God said it.

The Text: Romans 13:1-7 (NIV84)

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. ² Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ 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. ⁴ For he is God's servant to do you good. 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. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.