

**THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part forty-nine**  
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## THE KINGDOM OF GOD, THE STATE, MURDER, CAPITOL PUNISHMENT, WAR, AND PACIFISM

**Romans 13:1-7** - "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

Here are verses that raise questions. Obviously Paul deals with the role of government in today's fallen world. He says it is **appointed** by God. He says government has been divinely appointed to **serve those who are good (4a)** and to **judge those who are wicked (4b)**. And Paul's opening statements make it plain that the Christian isn't just a citizen of **one** kingdom, but **two**, and is to be "**subject**" to governing authorities (1-2). Those are some of the key thoughts.

But it's not quite that simple. There are **issues** packed into these verses like spray cans in airport luggage. What about **capital punishment?** Or **pacifism?** How shall we respond when our government calls us to go to war and to kill? What about the Christian's responsibility to **immoral, God defying government?** Do we obey Caesar or God? Or both? Those are the things that we need to work through as we come to this most practical of texts.

### 1) ON THE WHOLE, THE SCRIPTURAL POSITION IS THAT CHRISTIANS OBEY THEIR GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITIES, WITH VARY RARE EXCEPTIONS

This is clearly Paul's position in our text: **Romans 13:1-2** - "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."

Verse one contains the absolutes. Obedience is required, not just from **some** persons, but from "**every**" person. So the call to obey our earthly authorities isn't limited to authorities we agree with or voted for. Every person isn't required to **agree** with government authorities. We are simply called to **obey** earthly authorities - "**every**" person.

The second absolute is also in the opening verse. The **reason** every person is to obey his or her governmental authority is there is "**no authority except from God**" (2). This is quite important. The state - our earthly authorities - are not merely a human invention. If you look at the governmental authorities and see merely human politick and administrative red tape you will not see what God wants you to see. God has placed these earthly powers over us and wants us to see them as an extension of His hand.

And remember, the apostle isn't telling us to obey any particular **form** of government. The apostle never lived under a democracy. He lived under an emperor who executed those who didn't worship him. Most of the world doesn't share our political heritage. So we mustn't think Paul is talking about obeying only certain **forms** of governmental leadership.

This is important because we can always justify our disobedience to our leaders. We can think we are only called to submit to **good** government, not **bad**. And it's only a short step from that to defining good government as that which does what we want it to do. And, of course, no government can please all its people.

### 2) GOVERNMENT MUST BE DISOBEYED WHEN IT COMPELS US TO TURN FROM THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST

The wording of that point is very important. Christians must reject the authority of government when it **compels** their disobedience to Christ, not just when it **does** things or **allows** things that are against the cause of Christ. And this is an important distinction.

Examples abound. Our government **allows** same sex marriage. But it doesn't **compel** me to divorce my wife and marry a same sex spouse. My government **allows** abortions. It may even **encourage** them by **funding** them. But it doesn't, to my knowledge, **compel** all women over thirty-five to abort their pre-born children.

When government **allows** for things that are clearly contrary to God's Word Christians should **voice** concern and **marshal protest**. They should take all means available to advance truth and shine light. But when government **compels** disobedience to God's authority Christians must **reject** earthly authority and willingly, without retaliation, take the consequences from the state.

There are some great examples of the response of Christians to the compelling of government to disobey God:

**Acts 4:13-20** - "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. [14] But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. [15] But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, [16] saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. [17] But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name. [18] So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. [19] But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, [20] for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

Here we have the governing authorities **demanding** the apostles to never speak of Jesus again. Clearly that is not an option for the Christian. Notice how they **commit** to disobey the government and yet **submit** to its judgment at the same time: **4:19-20** - "But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, [20] for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.'" They **disobey** their leaders but they also **submit** to their judgment at the same time. That's the key.

### 3) THE PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT IS TO SERVE THE GOOD AND PUNISH THE BAD

**Romans 13:3-4** - "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

If earthly government is from God, what is it for? What should government **do** as a "**servant of God**"(4)? Paul outlines two things. First, government must "**serve**" those who are good. The apostle Peter outlines this from the Christian's point of view:

**1 Peter 2:11-17** - "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. [12] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evil doers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. [13] Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, [14] or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. [15] For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. [16] Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. [17] Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

See also Paul's words to Timothy in **1 Timothy 2:1-3** - "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, [2] for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. [3] This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior...."

As people do good and honor those in authority over them conditions are created for peace and quietness. And this lack of discord and strain makes it easier for the church to do its work. People can freely give attention to the gospel and the witness of Christians.

Of course, this doesn't always happen, and this should be a constant source of prayerful concern in the church of Jesus Christ. We alone pray and seek God because we alone know the damage and perversion sin has brought into this fallen world. We know there isn't enough wealth of education or wisdom to fix this broken world. Our earthly leaders, usually, don't even know what they're up against. They desperately need the prayers of God's people.

But the purpose of earthly government isn't just to **serve** the good. It's also to **punish** the wicked. Paul's strongest words on this point come in the last part of **Romans 13, verse 4** - **"....But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."**

Everyone in Paul's world knew what the sword was all about. Soldiers carried swords the way they carry guns today. And they used them to punish and kill. Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, one of the servants of the High Priest. But he was aiming for his head.

We'll close looking at some of the tricky issues coming out of this text. But the main point right now is, whether the government is responding to good behavior or bad, we Christians always see God in it. In other words, we never look at earthly authorities as they are **just in themselves**. However imperfect they may be, we always see something of God's plan behind them. We don't just make our response as though merely to men or women. We see our authorities - even very unchristian ones - as set where they are by God. And that means, even when they don't see it themselves, we give them honor as God's servants.

4) **ROMANS THIRTEEN MUST BE INTERPRETED WITHIN ITS SPECIFIC CONTEXT AS WE COMPARE IT WITH OTHER TEXTS**

I want to briefly look at just two difficult issues and try to put them into the context of the Scriptures and our text from Romans specifically. The issues are **capital punishment** and **our response to the leader's call to arms and pacifism**. Hard questions, these. But I think some sense can be made if we look carefully at Paul's whole chain of thought in Romans 12 and 13.

The subject of chapter thirteen only **looks** like a new subject. Really, Paul is only **continuing** the thread of argument begun in **Romans 12:18-19** - **"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"**

Looking carefully, we can see a couple of things. **"Never avenge yourselves"**(18) seems to fit in with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount - **Matthew 5:38-39** - **"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' [39] But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."**

So we know the Christian must never take revenge into his own hands. Which is the **"other"** cheek? It's the one on which you have not yet been struck. And Jesus' very words make clear that he is dealing with someone who has been **struck** on the cheek. When **I've** been struck, I don't strike back. That's the message. When I am **personally** wronged, it is not up to me to strike back. A response of violence in the face of a personal violence suffered is not a Christian option. Jesus and Paul both say so.

But **why** am I not to take revenge into my own hands? Paul tells us in **Romans 12:19** - **"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"** And **how** does God take vengeance on the wrong doer? Well, He will judge them all when Jesus comes again, so the Bible says. But that's not **all** the Bible says. And that's the theme Paul launches into in the very next section of his letter to the Romans - **Romans 13:4b** - **"....But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he [the earthly authority] does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."**

So we see **two streams** of Biblical teaching on violence and revenge in this fallen world. First, as a Christian, I am personally **never** to take revenge into my own hands for a wrong suffered. That kind of response is totally inappropriate for one who has been redeemed solely by grace and pardoned as richly in the face of my own guilt, as I have been. It is up to **God** to punish wrongdoers in this world, not me.

And one of the ways God has decided to punish wrongdoers is to punish them right now and right here. The whole New Testament makes the distinction between **turning the other cheek** when I've been **personally** wronged (struck on the cheek, in Jesus' words) and **turning a blind eye** to injustice under law. This is where Romans thirteen is **different** from the Sermon on the Mount. Whether we are comfortable with it or not, God has given people the **"sword"** to execute justice and judgment. God uses **government** to take revenge on the wicked. Paul says so.

To what extent may the sword of judgment be used? That's a hard call. But we are given some clues in the Biblical text - **Genesis 9:5-6** - **"And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and**

from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. [6] Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”

I know this verse gets somewhat overused in debates on capital punishment, but I chose it because it makes at least one point that lines up remarkably well with Paul’s words in **Romans 13:4** - “...But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

The parallel idea is that God uses *man* as the chosen instrument to mediate justice on the one who kills and sheds man’s blood. In other words, God has chosen to *not* take vengeance on those who shed human blood *directly*, but *indirectly*. He chooses *mediated* vengeance on those who take human life.

All of this means, to me, that at the very least, the Bible *allows* for capital punishment when a life has been taken. In other words, not all *killing* is forbidden in the Scriptures. In fact, as we’ll see again in a minute, God removed his blessing from King Saul because of Saul’s *refusal* to kill those whom God commanded to be killed.

So in some cases it has been God’s plan, right from Genesis through Romans, to delegate the judicial use of the sword to take vengeance on wrongdoers. God commanded it *directly* under the Old Testament theocracy and *delegated it indirectly* under governmental authority in the church age. Such killing, in my view, doesn’t fall under the prohibition against murder in the ten commandments.

The other issue that gets much attention is that of *war and pacifism*. How shall we submit to authorities if called to bear arms? Is the killing of *war* the same as the killing of *murder*? And are both forbidden in the Scriptures? These too, are very difficult questions. And, it seems to me, some of the same points apply as with capital punishment.

It seems awkward to me to apply the command, “You shall not kill,” across the board to all killing. I say this because you find people like *king Saul*, in the Old Testament, punished by God specifically because he *refused* to kill all the enemies God commanded him to kill. And you find Jesus, reserving some of His highest words of praise for people who were engaged in full-time military service.

And that fact alone is highly significant. Jesus never hesitated to tell people - all sorts of people - that they needed to leave their old life behind if they wanted to follow Him. He told a woman she could no longer live with the man with whom she lived. He told crooked tax collectors they needed to repay those whom they had cheated. He even told a covetous rich man he needed to leave his riches behind if he wanted to follow in discipleship. But, in several encounters with military people, he never once told any of them they needed to leave the army to follow Him.

So you seem to have the same distinction between *personal vengeance and violence* - which is forbidden - and *the role of the sword in the hands of the state in times of war* that we saw with the issue of *capital punishment by the state* and *murder by an individual*.

Please understand. I’m *not* saying *all* wars are justifiable. And I’m certainly not saying there couldn’t be times when the Christian, in good conscience, might not have to say, “No, this is not a legitimate cause to fight for, and I must not participate.” Only God knows the answer to those questions. All I’m trying to do at this point is mark out what I feel is the necessary distinction between *personal vindictive acts of violence and murder* - which are forbidden for the Christian - and the *God appointed role of the state to use sword as His own vengeance on human wickedness*.

And that’s the issue Paul puts front and center in this difficult text.