

Honouring God *and* the government

Whenever we look for principles by which we can decide how we should live in our modern world, we do well to look *first* at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christians are disciples of Jesus Christ. God's grace has helped us choose to live His way in our lives. Sometimes Jesus' way is surprisingly different from what we may expect! We can easily miss it. It can be a big challenge for us to follow.

During His trial and crucifixion Jesus said at least two important things about His own relationship to the land in which He lived.

- Jesus answered Pilate, the Roman governor: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place", John 18:36.
- When Pilate told Jesus, "Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?", Jesus answered: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above", John 19:10-11.

Jesus—God the Son—lived as a Jewish citizen in the nation of Israel. The country of Israel was itself occupied, controlled by the pagan Roman Empire. King Herod felt his position threatened and tried to kill the baby Jesus, Matthew 2:16. The longer Jesus lived the more He was accused of having the wish to rule over the Jews as their new earthly king, John 19:19-22. Yet in spite of this misunderstanding, and His mistreatment, Jesus kept respecting human government.

Jesus' kingship was helping people choose right from wrong. Unlike other kings Jesus rules over people, *not* places. Pilate had to make a judgement on Jesus because God had put him into that position at that time. He stood accountable to God for his decision—as we all do for our choices. Jesus remained respectful of the authorities.

When asked if it was right to pay tax to the Roman occupiers and their Emperor (whom some even worshipped as a god), Jesus said: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”, Luke 20:25.

Jesus believed Christians had responsibilities to both God *and* to the state. Coins and banknotes have human pictures on them. They should be used for paying due taxes. Every person is made in God’s image, Genesis 1:26-27. Every action of ours must help to bring all people to know God.

Jesus’ words as He stood before Pilate, John 18:36 and John 19:10-11, teach us five important truths about human governments and authorities:

1. Government power is given to people as God chooses.
2. Limits to government power are also set by God, just as He wills. God keeps ultimate sovereign power.
3. Confidence in the overall sovereignty of God enables the Christian to trustingly submit to all human forms of government—even to hostile ones. He or she knows that God is in ultimate control.
4. Only a misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus’ kingdom leads Christians to fight government. Peter showed this same misunderstanding by pulling out his sword when the Jews came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane, John 18:10-11.
5. Rulers are accountable to God for their use of power.

Christians show they are Christians by having Jesus’ own attitude to life:

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him ...”, Philippians 2:4-9.

Behind what appeared to be a setback, Sovereign God was outworking his purpose.

The New Testament clearly shows how the first Christians, like their Lord Jesus, respected government authorities even while they were being persecuted by them! We'll examine six Bible passages.

1. In **Romans 13:1-7** the “governing authorities”, Greek *exousia*, are the state and its official representatives. God chose to set up these authorities for His creation purposes (see “established”, and “instituted” in verses 1 and 2).

Three purposes for the state are clear in Romans 13:

1. To benefit the people, verse 4; see Romans 12:9
2. To enforce laws, verse 4; see Romans 12:19
3. To please God, as the Master whom they serve - knowingly or not.

They are God's servants, and are therefore accountable to Him, verses 6-7.

God's ideal is that the state uses its God-given right to serve, by ruling for the good of all, and not for evil, verses 4,6.

“Everyone”, verse 1, (“loved by God and called to be saints”, see Romans 1:7, therefore this means, “Every Christian), is to “submit to” and *not* to “rebel against” these authorities, Romans 13 verses 1-2.

To “submit”, Greek *hupotasso*, means to put yourself under the control of the God-given authority.

To acknowledge it has rights given to it by God.

Not to “rebel against”, Greek *anthisemi* and *antitasso*, means not to resist, not to oppose, not to organise yourself against the state. Only legal opposition is allowed.

Both the positive and the negative aspects of being governed are used here to leave no doubt as to the meaning.

“Honour”, Greek *time*, means the giving of proper respect and value to people and to their God-given authority, Romans 13 verse 7.

Civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty *only* when obedience to the state requires clear disobedience to God.

For example, see how the apostles defied a court order restricting their preaching of Jesus Christ.

Compare:

1. what God wanted, Acts 5:19, 20
2. what the authorities wanted, Acts 5: 28 and 4:18
3. what the church did, Acts 5:29 and 4:19-20 .

Christians must be careful. Of course there are many things they would like to do as Christians, for example:

- using Sunday to meet for worship
- publicly advertising Christian outreach events
- building a church meeting room in a specific location

But if God has not specifically commanded these things in Scripture, then not to do them does not disobey God. In these cases civil disobedience would be wrong. Legitimate legal protest, with persuasive debate is the best way forward, while humbly submitting to the authorities. They have every right *from God* to punish disobedience.

2 and 3. **1 Timothy 2:1-4 and Titus 3:1-8** show how Christians can give honour and respect:

An important priority in public worship, and in daily life, is to:

1. keep aware of the government’s position before God
2. pray for them regularly as they govern, including praying for their

salvation

3. obey them peacefully and thoughtfully
4. do good, positive and helpful things
5. keep a humble, and positively Christian, attitude.

God's plan includes salvation for everyone if possible, 1 Timothy 2.

Note the "all" in verses 2, 4 and 6. Even the "outsiders" (Gentiles) are to be reached, verse 7. In a similar way Jeremiah urged Israel to pray for their Babylonian conquerors, and he warned them against their own self-centred false prophets, Jeremiah 29:7-9.

4. **1 Peter 4:7–19** encourage praise to God especially when Christians suffer for simply being Christians!

"However, if you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name", verse 16.

The passage warns that it is always wrong to do wrong, whether you suffer for it or not. However, it is sometimes right to suffer, even for doing what is right! Christians do not live only for this life. Our real home is in heaven, and that is totally secure, 1 Peter 4:7, 13 and 19. Keeping heaven in mind helps Christians view things correctly here on earth! Christians know that God will always have the last word.

5. **1 Peter 2:13-17** is introduced by the earlier verses 11-12. This is an encouragement for Christians to live using totally different values from the non-Christians around us.

As Christians we must not let our own sinful desires drag us into worldly ways of responding to opposition. All Sudanese are very familiar with the hurt and destruction caused by wars. Verse 11 warns that many other things which happen in life can seriously damage the Christian soul—just like war damages people and property. We must win *this* war for our souls!

We must show that Christians are different people. Christians are to be holy in responding to everything that life throws at us. People should see we follow our Lord Jesus Christ. People should see God is on our side without us telling them! We must live by God's methods—even when they are not what the world would expect from us.

The word “every” authority, verse 13, makes this include:

- parents and children
- teachers and students
- church officers and members
- business leaders and the workforce
- as well as government and people.

God the Creator has put all of these authority lines in society for the good of all humanity.

According to 1 Peter 2 “doing good”, verse 15, and “living such good lives among the non-Christians”, verse 12, are God's way for us to be witnesses for Him.

How we live counts more than what we say.

Our goal is to win people to faith in Jesus Christ. We make our choices by asking ourselves: “which course of action is most likely to lead these non-Christians to conversion?”

1 Peter 2:18-21 says our Lord Jesus Christ calls on us to suffer in achieving God's purposes. Remember, Jesus Himself suffered all through His rejection and crucifixion.

Verse 23 becomes key—incredibly difficult to follow, but essential for living this way, which is the Christian way:

“When they hurled their insults at him (Jesus), he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him (God) who judges justly”.

The “endurance” of verse 19 is made possible when Christians live continually conscious that God is sovereign.

6. In **Matthew 5:13-16** our Lord Jesus wants us to be “salt” and “light” in our communities.

The influence of salt comes as it sacrifices itself into the meal. As it gives itself away it affects the taste of everything it touches.

Light enables people to see. As Christians live good Christian lives within society, everyone can see that the Christian gospel makes a genuine difference to every day life. This becomes evangelistic. Non-Christians are faced with a choice. When they *like* what they see and hear, they may well want to join us!

The six Bible passages we have looked at teach us that Christians please God by obeying government authorities, except when specifically commanded to sin.

Finally we must notice that throughout the Bible there is also a balancing argument to the one I have presented. It shows us we must use our Holy Spirit given wisdom every time we make a decision about our circumstances.

The Bible does give us several examples of God being pleased with His people when they disobeyed a human government on a particular issue:

1. the Israelite midwives refused to kill baby Israelite boys at birth

Exodus 1:15-21.

2. Moses' parents did the same for their own son

Exodus 2:1-10 and Hebrews 11:23.

3. Rahab hid Israelite spies from the authorities

Joshua 2:1-24 and Hebrews 11:31.

4. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the king's golden image

Daniel 3:1-30.

5. Daniel kept on praying to God when commanded not to do so

Daniel 6:1-28.

6. Peter and John continued to preach Jesus, when ordered not to

Acts 4:1-31 and 5:17-42.

There are also examples of God's people who worked with "non-Christian" authorities enabling God to use them in fulfilling His own purposes:

1. Daniel with Babylon's chief official, Daniel 1:1-21.

2. Jeremiah with King Cyrus, Ezra 1:1.

3. Ezra with King Artaxerxes, Ezra 7:11-28.

4. Nehemiah with King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah 2:1-9.

5. Paul used his Roman citizenship, Acts 16:35-40; Acts 22:22-29 and Acts 25:10-12.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him", James 1:5.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Explain situations where you have found it difficult or impossible to honour the government.

2. Consider the words of Jesus on trial before Pilate. John 18:28-19:16.

What difference does considering these make to situations described in 1. above?

3. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities", Romans 13:1.

From the surrounding verses, what makes this easier to do?

What makes it more difficult?

4. It is sometimes right to suffer, even for doing what is right.

Give some examples from life and from Scripture.

Try to include examples from several areas, implied in 1 Peter 2:13 (and listed above).

5. Share reasons *why* it is necessary to use spiritual wisdom in deciding action for every situation.