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Notes

The Servant Government: Romans 13:1-8Jerry Truex; Oct 16, 2016

Slide 2**A. Introduction**

Today we continue our series on the Church and State. Today, we will briefly look at Romans 13:1-8 and what Paul has to say about the proper role of government.

I will argue that Paul views the government ideally as instituted by God and accountable to God as a servant of the common good. In the Christian tradition, the government or the state has a proper role to play in protecting the public and promoting human flourishing.

However, I will also argue that when the state is derelict in its duty to protect and to promote the common good, the Apostle Paul allows for civil disobedience and prophetic criticism of the government.

To demonstrate this, we will briefly walk step-by-step through Romans 13:1-8.

Slide 3**A. The Purpose of the Government**

The historical context: When Paul wrote the letter to Rome (ca. 56 CE), it is likely that Jews and Jewish Christians in Rome were being persecuted. Paul is telling them not to rebel or take up zealot-like armed resistance.¹

¹ The Edict of Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE. Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the widespread fires that destroyed much of Rome in 64 CE. The Jewish War with Rome broke out in 66 CE. The point is: Paul is writing to Jewish and Gentile Christians who were more-or-less powerless and probably under some pressure from the Roman government to pay taxes.

Slide 4**1. Command: Submit to the government (1a)**

¹ Let every person be subject [hypotassō] to the governing authorities;

¹ Πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις ὑποτασσέσθω

The Greek word, “be subject to” (*hypotassō*), literally means to “line up with.”

- The word is in the passive voice is best translated as *to submit, be placed under, or to yield to*.²
- Paul is calling for submission, not blind, uncritical obedience.
- It means “to be properly lined up or ordered; the opposite is to resist or disrupt proper ordering, not disobedience.”³ The NT avoids using Greek words for “obey” (*hypakouō*) when talking about the Churches relationship to the state.⁴

Two examples:⁵

- Christians who refused to worship Caesar, but permitted Caesar to put them to death, submitted to Caesar even though not they were not obeying him.
- Christians who refuse to do what the government asks, but accept the penalty for not doing so, submit to the government even though they are not obeying.

Slide 5**2. Reason: Governments are accountable to God (1b)**

^{1b} for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted [tassō] by God.

^{1b} οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐξουσία εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ αἱ δὲ οὖσαι ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμέναι εἰσίν.

² See Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 408.

³ John E. Toews, *Romans*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 2004) 313-4.

⁴ Walter Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 9.

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 212.

Paul writes that God “instituted” governing authorities.

- To “institute” (*tassō*) means *to fix, determine, order*.⁶
- God *orders* or *determines* the limits of governing authorities.
- This means that state and government officials are ultimately accountable to God.

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If governments are ordered or arranged by God, then two things follow:

- *people should submit* to the state.
- *governments should submit* to God’s precepts of justice, respect, neighbor love.

That governments are instituted by God does not mean that God always approves of what governments do.⁷

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3. Warning: No military rebellion (v. 2)

² Therefore whoever resists [antitassō] authority resists [anthistēmi] what God has appointed, and those who resist [anthistēmi] will incur judgment.

² ὥστε ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ διαταγῇ ἀνθέστηκεν οἱ δὲ ἀνθεστηκότες ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα λήμψονται

What kind of resistance is Paul talking about?

Paul is talking about armed rebellion. Two words are used for “resist” and both have military connotations:

- *Antitassō* means “to arrange in a battle against,” to rebel (cf. Acts 18:6)
- *Anthistēmi* means “to stand over against [in battle],” to resist, to rebel

⁶ See Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 336-7.

⁷ So John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 203.

So Paul is urging Christians not to bear arms against or “line up against” governing authorities. He is urging the Roman Christians not to use armed rebellion against Rome, not to be like the Jewish zealots that started the Jewish War (66-73 CE).

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4. Reason: Governments should serve the common good (3-4)

³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴ for it is God's servant for your good [lit. “for the good”].

³ οἱ γὰρ ἄρχοντες οὐκ εἰσὶν φόβος τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἔργῳ ἀλλὰ τῷ κακῷ θέλεις δὲ μὴ φοβεῖσθαι τὴν ἐξουσίαν· τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποίει καὶ ἕξεις ἔπαινον ἐξ αὐτῆς. ⁴ θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν

Here we see the purpose the state:

- The government is *God's servant for the good*.

There are two implications about political leaders:

- Political leaders are “officeholders,” public servants, and not ruler-gods.
- Political leaders are to promote the “the common good” (εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν).⁸

Serving the common good of its citizens becomes the primary criterion for evaluating any government or government official:

Do they promote the common good as defined by the Bible?

To serve the common good, governments need to restrict harmful behavior and reward good conduct.

⁸ I am interpreting τὸ ἀγαθόν as a reference to “the common good.” That phrase is found in 1 Cor. 12:7 (τὸ συμφέρον) in reference to the church, but the notion “the good” as a common heritage of all people is explicit in Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God.

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⁴ ... but if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword [machaira] in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

⁴ ... ἐὰν δὲ τὸ κακὸν ποιῆς φοβοῦ. οὐ γὰρ εἰκῆ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ. θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν ἔκδικος εἰς ὀργὴν τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι

So Paul warns the readers not to engage in bad or harmful behaviors, which will bring a violent reaction from the government, which has the sword.

The sword (μάχαιρα) is a symbol of judicial authority.⁹

- It was a long dagger, not an instrument of war.
- It was not for capital punishment, since the Romans used crucifixion.
- It was a symbol of authority; a symbol of violence to control its subjects.

Slide 10**5. Command Restated: Submit (v. 5)**

⁵ Therefore one must be subject [hypotassō], not only because of wrath but also because of conscience [suneidēsis].

⁵ διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν

Now Paul restates the command to submit to the government and offers two motives for doing so:

- 1) because of wrath or punishment, which we want to avoid.
- 2) because of conscience (συνείδησις), which refers to our inner awareness of God's will¹⁰ which we want to fulfill.

⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 206.

¹⁰ Cf. Rom. 2:14-15; 12:2.

Slide 11**6. When should we submit to governments? (v. 6)**

⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are *God's servants*, when attending to this very thing".

⁶ διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε. λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκατεροῦντες.

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Verse 6 answers two very important questions.

- Why do we pay taxes?
 - It is for the same reason, which refers back to the "the common good" mentioned in verse 4.
- When should we submit to the government?
 - When they attend to this very thing, referring back to "the common good" in verse 4
 - Only when the government is faithful to "common good," Verse 6 also states that governments only have authority, "when they attend to this very thing," namely, "the common good" (v. 4).

Side Bar: The Greek grammar of verse 6b.

Gk: λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκατεροῦντες

Lit: *servants for of God they are for this very thing when attending/being faithful*

Trans: "for they are servants of God when they are faithful to this very thing"

προσκατεροῦντες as a present tense temporal participle, describing the circumstances or conditions (being faithful to the common good) for which government officials may be described as "God's servants."

WHEN the government acts on behalf of its citizenry—for the common good, to reward good, and to restrain evil (vv. 3-4)—we should submit.

BUT if government officials are not attending to the common good,

- if they are not acting in accord with God’s justice,
- if civil authorities prohibit what God commands, or if they command what God prohibits, *it permissible to resist nonviolently the government.*

Why? Because “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). We live before God, not the state.

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7. What are our obligations to the government? (v. 7)

⁷ Pay to all what is due them--taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

⁷ ἀπόδοτε πᾶσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς τῷ τὸν φόρον τὸν φόρον τῷ τὸ τέλος τὸ τέλος τῷ τὸν φόβον τὸν φόβον τῷ τὴν τιμὴν τὴν τιμὴν

Verses 7-8 describes what we owe to the government, what we are to contribute to the servants of “the common good”:

- We owe revenue (φόρον) and taxes (τέλος) to Caesar.
- But we owe respect/fear (φόβον) and honor (τιμὴν) to God alone.

Rom 13:7 seems to echo of Mark 12:17: “Give to Caesar the things that are the Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

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8. What are our obligations to our fellow citizens? (v. 8)

Now Paul turns to what we owe fellow citizens.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (NRSV)

⁸ Μηδενὶ μηδὲν ὀφείλετε εἰ μὴ τὸ ἀλλήλους ἀγαπᾶν· ὁ γὰρ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἕτερον νόμον πεπλήρωκεν.

What we owe to others is love (13:8), which is defined as keeping the 2nd half of the Ten Commandments and not harming others (13:9-10).

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B. Servant Government

The purpose of human government, according to Romans 13, is to promote the common good and for that we need a *servant government*.¹¹

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According to Jim Wallis, the government that serves the common good has two primary functions: To protect and to promote.¹²

- 1) TO PROTECT the public
 - a) by *restraining evil*—police, fire, homeland security, government regulations (banking, food, medicine, consumer protection, etc.) and
 - b) by *upholding justice*—economic, political, legal systems.
- 2) TO PROMOTE human flourishing—jobs, production, transportation, education, freedom, human rights, health care, etc.

In Christian tradition, there has been a proper role human governments.

On the one hand, it is popular to talk about making government as small as possible. Some will say that they want to *shrink government small enough to drown it in the bathtub*.¹³ But I wonder if they want to eliminating waste and corruption,

¹¹ Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Kindle Edition, Grand Rapids: Backer, 2014) 222 or loc. 3901.

¹² Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Kindle Edition, Grand Rapids: Backer, 2014) 227 or loc. 3985.

¹³ Attributed to Grover Norquist; https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Grover_Norquist.

or do they want to reduce or eliminate legitimate government functions that serve to protect us, like bank regulation, the department of education, the Food and Drug Administration, or what?

On the other hand, it is popular to think that government can solve all our problems or that government can “save” us as if the government were god. When the state becomes too big and too powerful, it can become unresponsive to the common good and unaccountable to God and its citizenry. In a worst case scenario, the state can become tyrannical, self-serving, and destroy the common good.

When the state becomes derelict in its duty to protect and to promote the common good, Romans 13 and Revelation 13 allows for civil disobedience, nonviolent resistance, and publicly criticizing the state.

When we engage in civil disobedience or public criticism of the state, we are following in the footsteps of the Hebrew prophets, like Micah and Amos, and we are imitating Jesus in his confrontation with the political, economic, and religious powers that oppressed the Jewish peasants of his time.¹⁴

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C. Summary & Reflections

Summary

- 1) According to Romans 13, governments are instituted and overseen by God.
- 2) As such, they are to reflect God’s justice, peace, and blessings as expressed in the Bible.¹⁵
- 3) Put differently, the role of the state is to protect people and to promote human flourishing.

¹⁴ On Jesus’ political and social agenda in redressing the oppression of the poor, see R. David Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); William R. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005).

¹⁵ For an overview of God’s *shalom justice* for humanity, see Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, & Peace* (Nappanee, Indiana: Evangel Publishing House, 1987).

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Five Mandates

By implication, there are five mandates for us:¹⁶

According to Romans 13, when it comes to the state, we have five mandates:

1. **Respect** government authorities, because they are God's servants; they serve you and the common good of our society.
2. **Cooperate** with the government as long as the government seeks the common good and, no matter what, never resort to armed rebellion.

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3. **Only disobey** government authorities
 - a. if it violates a commandment of God,
 - b. if it requires you to act immorally or unethically, or
 - c. if it goes against your conscience.
4. **Pay taxes.** That's a primary way to show love in the public sphere.
5. **Owe nothing, except love,** which fulfills the law.

¹⁶ I believe I derived some or all of these implications from a course I took from John E. Toews on Romans in 1989. However, his commentary does not reflect this; see John E. Toews, *Romans*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 2004) 317-8.