

Bible Study Romans 13

“13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”

This statement is somewhat surprising. The “governing authorities” that Paul is referring to is the Roman government, which was evil in many respects. It was a government that was ruled by emperors, many of which were truly depraved.

Paul’s command for Christians to obey civil authorities is expressed elsewhere in the Bible.

“Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:13-14).

The default setting for Christians is to obey civil authorities. One reason is that it is better to live peaceably under oppressive circumstances than to live in violent chaos.

The emperor in power when Paul wrote Romans was Nero.



Nero had his own mother killed. He also banished his wife because she was infertile, then had her murdered. He also had his step-brother and perceived political rivals murdered. He kicked to death a mistress that was carrying his child.

In 64 AD, much of Rome was destroyed by the Great Fire. Several authorities believed that Nero himself caused the fire to force the Senate to rebuild the city according to his plans. Nero blamed the small number of Christians in Rome at the time for the fire, and had them arrested. The historian Tacitus said that Nero had Christians burned to death to light his garden. Both Peter and Paul were martyred under Nero.

It is therefore surprising that Paul described the Roman government as so worthy of obedience by Christians. There are several possibilities for this. First, the book of Romans was written 57-58 AD. This was early in Nero’s reign, and before many of his atrocities took place.

Another reason is that the Roman government had been very helpful to Paul. He was a Roman citizen and they came to his rescue on several occasions. Roman soldiers spared him being flogged (Acts 22:25-29). The Roman governor Felix rescued Paul from being murdered by Jewish plotters, and sent him to Caesarea for his protection (Acts 23:11-36).

Jewish plotters discovered Paul's location and tried to have him extradited and killed, but Paul used his Jewish citizenship and appealed to Caesar in Rome, which the Roman governor Agrippa granted. On the trip to Rome, Paul's ship was shipwrecked, and the soldiers planned to kill Paul and the other prisoners, but a Roman centurion overruled them and let them all swim ashore (Acts 27:42-44). When they finally arrived in Rome, a centurion separated Paul from the other prisoners and placed him under house arrest guarded by a single soldier (Acts 28:16), and allowed him unlimited access (vv. 30-31). Every step of the way, Paul was protected by Roman officials and officers.

No wonder he was so positive about them when he wrote Romans.

“² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

When Paul wrote Romans, the worst savagery of the Emperor Nero was yet to come, and the brutal Roman persecution of the Christians was just beginning. It would last until 313 AD, when Constantine legalized Christianity.

“⁵ Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷ Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”

Paul's exhortation for Christians to pay taxes is in line with the teachings of Christ:

“Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar's.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:17-21).

More than any other Christian confession, Orthodoxy has lived under frequent and often severe persecution. Roman Orthodox (East and West) endured Roman persecution for 250 years. Greek Orthodox suffered under Turkish oppression for 376 years. Slavic Orthodox survived Communist oppression for 74 years. Arab Orthodox have been struggling under Muslim oppression from the 7th century until the present day. They all had to wrestle under a paradox: how much do oppressed Orthodox obey the civil authorities, as Paul commands in this chapter of Romans, and when do they disobey the government in order to be faithful to Christ?

We have a continuum. At one end is paying taxes, which we have seen is a required form of obedience to the government. At the other end is denying Christ, which is an extreme sin which might jeopardize our salvation. But what about everything in between?

The Bible gives us some cases where Christian disobedience is justified.

“Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live” (Exodus 1:15-17).

Any order for a Christian to kill babies must be disobeyed.

“Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?... Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:13-14, 16-18).

Any government order to practice idolatry must be disobeyed.

“So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.)” (1 Kings 18:2-4).

Christians must hide innocent fugitives to prevent them from being murdered.

“Saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:28-29).

“So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 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, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20).

“And when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and

from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (Acts 5:40-42).

If the government orders the Church to cease from proclaiming Christ, that order must be disobeyed.

“Then these high officials and satraps came by agreement¹⁰ to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live forever! All the high officials of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions... When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously...” (Daniel 6:6-7, 10).

These are biblical cases where the people of God were required to disobey the civil authorities. However, this is not an exhaustive list. In the times and places where the Orthodox Church has lived under hostile governments, the clergy and laity had to make many difficult decisions whether or not to rebel. Here is a chart summarizing various restrictions that have been placed on Orthodox Christians, and the degree to which the Church did not actively rebel:

Restrictions under:

The Pagan Roman Empire:	Christians response:
Offer sacrifices and burn incense to pagan deities	Refused, martyred
Participate in Pagan religious festivals	Refused, martyred
Publicly denounce Christ	Refused, martyred
Greeks under Turks (“Sharia law”):	Until War of Independence:
No evangelization, death penalty to convert Muslims to Christianity	Complied
Greatly reduced number of churches, no crosses, bells or icons in public	Complied
Clergy forced to collect taxes for the state	Complied
Special tax on Christians (“zhezia”)	Complied
Testimony not admissible in court	Complied
Severe penalties to disparage Islam in any way	Complied
Christians not allowed to jobs over Muslims	Complied
Christian males could not marry Muslim women, but Muslim men could marry Christian women.	Complied
Christian boys drafted into Muslim Army, forced to convert to Islam, became cannon fodder (“jannisaries”).	Complied
Slavs under Communism:	Until collapse of USSR:
Most churches, monasteries and seminaries were closed, seized, desecrated and/or destroyed	Complied

Most clergy arrested, imprisoned, executed	Complied
Many clergy were replaced by informers loyal to the state	Complied
All children taught anti-Christian propaganda in schools	Complied
No charitable work allowed	Complied

Christians in many Muslim countries still under state-imposed sharia restrictions.

Christians in the modern world still wrestle with the issue of compliance with evil government policies. The Civil Rights movement in the 1960's heavily influenced, and was influenced by, Christians. The movement began with black Christians in the South who were subjected to the unjust Jim Crow laws. With a series of sit-in's, marches, demonstrations and boycotts, they practiced civil disobedience that ended with the end of those laws. Greek Archbishop Iakovos was the few white clergymen to march with the protestors:



Christian disobedience to anti-Christian government policies is still a live issue today. During the Covid lockdowns, the government forced churches to close in some parts of the country. The Orthodox churches complied, but some other churches did not. Lawsuits were brought against government officials shut down churches as “non-essential” while allowing bars, liquor stores stayed open, as well as allowing mass outdoor public protests.

metro
If New York protests OK amid coronavirus, so is outdoor worship, federal judge rules

By Carl Campese
 Published June 26, 2020, 6:10 p.m. ET



U.S. priest, Steven Smith, was among the priests who argued that state leaders "violated" the pandemic to create "a veritable dictatorship" with lockdown rules.
 via Catholic

In the UK, police arrested a Christian silently praying by herself outside an abortion clinic.

<https://youtu.be/wXURFRSUS9U?feature=shared>

This case was eventually thrown out. Canada has passed a law banning speech deemed offensive to homosexuals:

Canadian law would ban 'offensive remarks' near drag performances

by ALEC SCHEMMELE | The National Desk | Wed, April 5th 2023 at 11:16 AM
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What restrictions to Christianity do you think might happen here in the future?

Christian rejection of certain government laws can be subject of debate, but this chapter closes with the precepts that apply to all Christians in all situations. The first is the paramount importance of love:

"⁸ Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

The second all-purpose command to pursue union with Christ, and disunity with sin:

"¹¹ And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."