

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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One's Attitude Toward Civil Authority (13:1-7)

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. ²Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves; ³for 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. ⁴For 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.. ⁵Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

What Paul is addressing here is that **the role of civil government** that provides for the well-being of the society of men is instituted by God,

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 (13:1).

That **there is an intended purpose for civil government** - to

encourage good and deter evil,

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,” (13:3).

That to achieve their purpose, **these agencies may use the sword,**

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,” (13:4).

That they are **instituted for the work of vengeance** (*ekdikeo* - measuring out justice) hence, to discourage evil,

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, (13:4).

That **Civil authorities are ministers/servants of God**; i.e., as long as they are faithful to their divinely appointed purpose to function as “a praise to good” and “a terror to evil,”

For he is God's minister (diakonos) 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,” (13:3-4).

That **Christians (as private citizens) are under these authorities** and are to obey them, i.e., when they function as authorities who are “a terror to evil” and “a praise to good,” (13:3a, 4), and, as such, they are to support them with their taxes,

For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (13:6-7).

With regard to evil, civil governments are God's avengers [agents of wrath]. They are authorized by God to retaliate against evil and, in order to accomplish their purpose; they may use the sword [use force to deter, execute, avenge or punish]. The term used for sword here is the Greek *machairan* which in Latin is *gladius*, the term from which derives *gladiator* (sword fighter). Paul's use of the expression "bears not the sword in vain" reflects the Roman rule of *jus gladii* – “justice by the sword,” and was the legal term used in the Roman Empire for capital punishment. Paul sees this as a right of those governments who are true to God's purpose as civil governments.

Personal Resistance and Civil Retaliation

The instruction of Romans 12:17, “Repay no one evil for evil,” is a prohibition against personal retaliation or avenging one’s self. There is a difference between resistance and retaliation. In verse 19a, Paul instructs his readers, “avenge not yourself (*ekdikeo* - to measure out justice);” in verse 19b, he says that retaliation, which he identifies as “the vengeance or wrath of God,” is the duty or responsibility of civil government.

The Precedent of Jesus and the Resistance of Evil

When speaking of resistance we are talking about self-defense; whether verbal or physical, it is our right and our responsibility. When Jesus was taken out of Nazareth to throw him over a cliff, he resisted them and walked right through the crowd (Luke 4:28-29). In the exorcisms Jesus performed, the demons plead with Jesus not to destroy them (Luke 4:31-37). Why were these demonic beings concerned about what Jesus might do to them, if resisting evil (i.e., preventing them from possessing their prey) was not morally permissible to him? In his lifetime, Jesus resisted evil in a verbal and physical way. In every instance of his resistance of evil he set a precedent for his followers (i.e., What would Jesus do?) concerning the issue of the resistance of evil?

In Jesus’ cleansings of the Temple, found in John 2 and Mark 11:15-19, he is clearly addressing a behavior he feels is a violation of his domain, a place for the worship of God. Those he drives out of the Temple are imposing themselves on or invading his world, and Jesus’ actions are a resistance of their violation of something he considered belonging to the Father and, consequently, to him as the Son of God. Even though he was the

Son of God his actions are a precedent for the resistance of evil.

The Precedent of the Apostles of Christ

Jesus' apostles followed resistance of evil, as a precedent. In Acts 9:23-30, Paul was lowered over the wall in Damascus to avoid assassination by the Jews; and in Acts 23:12-24, when Paul learned of an assassination plot against him, he informed the civil authorities to protect him from the violence intended toward him. In each of these events a resistance of evil is evident. If the measures they took to avoid conflict had not been possible, could Jesus or Paul not have taken more drastic steps to protect themselves?

In addressing soldiers, whose responsibility is that of resisting or deterring evil, neither Jesus nor his apostles ever suggested that they must resign their position as a soldier in order to be a Christian; cf. Matt. 8:5-15; Luke 3:14; Acts 10:1-11; 16:23-34.

The Issue of Capital Punishment

The issue of capital punishment has been a matter of controversy for centuries. One cannot, however, deny the fact that here in this text, Paul does imply that the civil authorities are appointed by God to use the sword in deterring evil and punishing the one doing evil. The Hebrew Scriptures endorse and even command capital punishment under certain circumstances. It is suggested by some that an Old Testament precedent cannot be used for those under the New Testament. This argument does not address the issue of the morality of capital punishment. What God commanded in the past would be just as moral or immoral today as it was then; that is, if it was indeed an immoral act.

In Acts 25:10-12, the apostle Paul declared before the civil authorities, "If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything worthy of death, I refuse not to die," exemplifying that he had no objection to the capital punishment principle. The only logical objection to capital punishment that can be made is the same as would be made concerning blind obedience to a government that is a praise to evil and a terror to good, rather than a terror to evil and a praise to good. Capital punishment is sometimes unjustly administered; this is not acceptable to God and neither can it be to the Christian; but an abuse or misuse of an action authorized by God does not mean that what God has authorized is evil because it is abused.

The issue of following the instruction of God when men in authority say to do otherwise is the situation that confronted the apostles in Jerusalem when commanded by the Sanhedrin Council not to teach or speak in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:1-22). The Sanhedrin Council was the recognized authority for the Jewish people in matters of religion and in some civil dispute. The apostles were all Jews and, speaking legally, they were subject to the mandates of the Sanhedrin. Their dilemma was, as expressed by Peter to the Sanhedrin, “Judge you for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God,” (Acts 4:19). In this instance, civil disobedience was justified.

The Argument Set in Logical Form

Major Premise: *If* there are teachings and/or examples (whether explicit or implicit in nature) in the NT of an apostle of Christ endorsing the right of civil government to wield the sword against those who practice evil (to violate the rights of another) and to carry out the act of capital punishment against those who have done that which is worthy of death, **then** there is evidence that these things are approved of God.

Minor Premise: There are teachings and examples (explicit and implicit in nature) in the NT of an apostle of Christ endorsing the right of civil government to wield the sword against those who practice evil (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; Acts 23:12-14), and to carry out acts of capital punishment against those who have done that which is worthy of death (cf. Rom. 13:4; Acts 25:11).

Conclusion: **Then** there is evidence that these things (resistance of evil, civil authority, retaliation against evil [enforcement of the law], capital punishment and war in the defense of one’s country) are approved of God.

It is the case that Paul’s teaching here in Romans 13:1-7, warrants the conclusion that under certain circumstances the resistance of evil is approved by God. But this does not mean that resistance is enjoined upon us as a mandate for authorization for all circumstances of life.