

## THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO GOVERNMENT (Rom. 13)

We have been listening to what many people have been saying recently about government, and especially what the new Trump administration in the US might turn out to be like. We have also been inundated, - and intimidated ☺ - with the multifarious 'wisdom' relating to our own Brexit agenda. So, it is particularly relevant to examine what ought to be our *Christian* and *Biblical* attitude to politics and government.

One of the primary passages in Scripture relating to this subject, - and there are many in both the Old and New Testaments, - is found in Paul's letter to the Romans. ... More than any other person, Paul was responsible for the dissemination of Christianity across the Roman Empire. He travelled widely, preached extensively, suffered cruelly, and had the most comprehensive knowledge of the Church. He was, therefore, best suited to write this letter to the Christians in Rome, the most important and influential city in the Empire.

Being such a place of influence, Rome administered governments, politics, social development, urban progression, and everything which was important for its citizens. Rome had a vast influence, - across a massive area, - and its policy when it invaded a country, was generally to work along with the people already in power to improve and develop the infrastructure. Paul, of course, was aware of all this and he used his Roman citizenship to the benefit of the Gospel.

His primary focus in his epistles to the various churches was to teach, encourage and commend the great truths to believers who had not received apostolic instruction ... These assemblies were probably established as a result of the Jews who had been present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). They would have returned to Rome, established a church, introduced the Gospel to the Gentiles, - ... to the Jew first, then the Gentile, - so that the church in Rome would have consisted of converted Jews and Gentiles.

So let's turn to see what Paul taught about the Christian's attitude to government, **Rom. 13:1** Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. **2** Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: **4** For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. **5** Wherefore ye must needs be

subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. <sup>6</sup> For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

That is quite straightforward. Paul teaches the Christians in Rome to be good and honourable citizens. The Romans would not have felt threatened by the new religion since there were already so many religions and philosophies in Rome ... after all, what is another one?! ... It was actually the Jews who stirred up many of the anti-Christian attitudes. ... But, as far as the Christians were concerned, Paul was at pains to teach them the government had been put in place by God and to be accepted and respected as the means God had established to guard the rule of law and to keep order in society. ... That was their remit, and that is what they, - the government, - were responsible for before God.

... No problem, that all makes sense! ... *However*, Rome was a pagan city. Its laws were founded upon idolatry ... and the more Christianity began to develop, the threat against paganism became apparent. In turn, this presented the Jews with the opportunity to manipulate the Emperor Nero to blame the Christians on starting the great fire in Rome which burned for six days in 64 AD ... The consequences of this was that the Christians were persecuted and slaughtered for their faith. ... Hence, it was extremely difficult being a Christian in Rome.

Before we get to grips with what Paul wrote concerning the Christian's responsibility to government, listen to what Jesus said, <sup>Mt. 5:5</sup> *Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.* ... When Jesus returns, the meek will inherit the earth.... Not the *weak*, but the *meek* ... and then He told His disciples, <sup>13</sup> *Ye are the salt of the earth* ... Salt, in the Middle East, was a preservative and also a flavour enhancement. It kept away contamination, and it also added a good taste. And that is how Christians were instructed, - to be used as 'seasoning' and 'enhancement' to the people around them. ... *[B]ut if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.* <sup>14</sup> *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.* <sup>15</sup> *Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.* <sup>16</sup> *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

God's people are a 'set apart' people for the purpose of showing glory to God, and the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. In whatever circumstances they are to be found, - right across the world, in every situation and context, - Christians are to be different, for good and for God ... different in outlook, different in their priorities, different in their prospects, and different in the One they serve,

as Peter explained, **1 Peter 2:9** ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light ... In the first eleven chapters of Romans Paul had been teaching doctrine, theology ... and on the basis of such instruction, he went on to present the application, **Rom. 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy *[holiness]*, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup> And be not conformed to this world: but be ye *transformed* by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

... So, on the basis of what you have been taught, wrote Paul, here is how you are expected to live ... But how do you do live to such a high Godly standard when you are part of an ungodly world? How do you meaningfully represent Christ?

Well, Paul begins, **Rom. 13:1** Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. ... What an encouragement! The powers that be are not there because the majority has voted them in, - they are not there simply upon the basis of an election, but they are there because it is God's will for them to be there. ... That is what Paul is saying ... For example, He put Joseph in power in Egypt, and Daniel in power in Babylon. He put Sennacherib in power over the Assyrians who attacked and invaded the ten northern tribes, and He put Nebuchadnezzar in power over the Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem and carried off its people into exile. He made Darius king over the Medes and Persians, Alexander over the Greeks, Antiochus Epiphanes over the Seleucids, the Caesars over the Romans ... and bring it on down to this present day ... There is not a single power which God has *not* put in place ... and that is what Paul made abundantly clear, **Rom. 13:1** For there is *no* power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

And that is also what Jesus taught for, - if He had not believed that, He would have stood up against and repelled those soldiers who came to arrest Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He could have rebuffed the government institutions of Herod and Pontius Pilate ... and He could have stopped them nailing His body to the cross, but He didn't. Instead, He Who put them in power is the great example of the believer being subject unto the higher powers which have been ordained of God ... God even has a purpose putting in place ungodly men and women.

And Paul told the Christians ... that is the way it is ... and the will of God (Rom. 12:2) is to keep their witness for Him, no matter what circumstances present around them. ... *Even if* they are persecuting you because you are a Christian, you are to ... **Rom. 12:14** Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. **15** Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep ... **17** Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. **18** If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. **19** Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. **20** Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. **21** Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

*That* is the will of God ... and that is how He saved you to act, for God saved you to be salt to preserve His righteousness, - as 'salt', - and to be as a 'light' to shine in the darkness. ... It is the same teaching Peter presented, **1Peter 2:13** Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man *for the Lord's sake*: whether it be to the king, as supreme; **14** Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. **15** *For so is the will of God*, ... and what is the purpose? ... that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. ... This was how the Lord Jesus taught, **Mt. 22:21** Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.

When He hung on the cross, the centurion in charge of the soldiers ... on looking at the Saviour, he declared with some other of his men, **Mt. 27:54** Truly this was the Son of God. ... Jesus silenced the ignorance of foolish men.

Peter wrote in his epistle, **1Peter 2:16** As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness [*i.e. antinomianism*], but as the servants of God. **17** Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. **18** Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward [*the crooked, perverse, awkward, harsh*]. **19** For this is thankworthy [*χάρις, grace*], if a man for conscience toward [*i.e. who wants to do what pleases*] God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. **20** For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? [*what credit is there in bearing up under a beating you deserve?*] but if, when ye do well [*if you haven't done anything wrong*], and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God [*God looks on you with χάρις, grace*]. **21** For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: **22** Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: **23** Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: **24** Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

That is the Example to follow. It doesn't matter who does you wrong ... or even how evil they are, - we have a responsibility before God, and to do as Jesus did. ... And that is the lesson Paul and Peter were teaching ... Nero is a cruel man, but he has been ordained to, - put in, - that position by God, as has the senate around him ... and you have to be subject to them, and honour them.

And that is also what God's Word teaches in the Old Testament ... Why did David not kill Saul in the cave when he had the opportunity? He explained, **I Sam. 24:10** *some bade me kill thee: but mine eye spared thee; and I said, I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the LORD'S anointed.* ... Saul, - the LORD'S anointed, - **Rom. 13:1** *For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*

Sometimes it is hard to accept that, but that is what the Lord makes perfectly clear. ... Something else He makes perfectly clear is that governments and nations will increasingly obstruct and oppose His ways ... What do you do then? ... Within the parameters of what is being taught here, the same Jesus Who gave Himself over to the bureaucracy of the Jews and Romans, instructs, **Mt. 6:33** *seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness* ... That is also supported by Paul, **Rom. 12:18** *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.* ... That insinuates there may be occasions when it is *not* possible, therefore, the Christian's priority is *the kingdom of God, and his righteousness*.

That, however, does not give us a 'blank sheet' to contravene the laws of the land ... Our first course of action, - like Jesus on the cross, - is to be good citizens because we are His witnesses.

However, when a situation is blatantly contrary to God's Word, our allegiance to the Heavenly Kingdom must take precedence. That is our prerogative. ... When man's law contradicts God's law, God's law is always to take priority. For example, many Christians today are living in a country whose laws do not permit them to speak of their Saviour ... Well, their faith in Christ takes priority. Many countries do not allow the Bible to be brought in. Once again, obedience to the Heavenly Kingdom supersedes every other. ... We have all heard of the row over the cake in Northern Ireland, when the Christians were taken to court and found guilty because they would not include a slogan which God's Word condemns. ... God's Word takes priority over anything the world determines.

... Daniel was told to stop praying because of a new law which had been introduced, **Dan. 6:10** Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. ... *God* and his faith in God had a higher priority. In the same way, when the apostles were told not to preach about Jesus anymore, **Acts 4:19** Peter and John answered and said unto them [*the authorities*], Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. **20** For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. ... *God's rules overrule!* ... *God comes first!* ... And when Peter and John were pulled in again before Ananias the high priest, he asked them, **Acts 5:28** Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. **29** Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. ... Yes, occasions arise when we cannot and must not do what the world commands because God's Word comes first, and it must be obeyed, regardless.

But even *when* the laws of the land go against the law of God, it does not demean the command to be subject unto the powers which God has ordained ... and pray for the people who institute them, for Paul wrote, **1 Tim. 2:1** I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; **2** For kings [*βασιλεῖς, rulers, leaders, commanders*], and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. **3** For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; **4** Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. ... We are expressly told to pray for them. It doesn't matter whether we agree with them, or voted for them ... If they are the people God has instituted into positions of power, it is His will that we pray for them. ... That is our responsibility ... and we are even to pray for their salvation.

It also follows that the responsibility of those for whom we pray is first and foremost towards God for they will have to give an account of their governorship to Him, **Rom. 13:4** For he is *the minister [δίακονος] of God* to thee for good [*for your benefit*]. ... for he is *the minister [δίακονος] of God*, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil [*i.e. he is the means God has set in place to maintain law and order*]. **5** Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. **6** For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are *God's ministers [λειτουργός]*, attending continually upon this very thing. ... A *λειτουργός* is a military word. It means someone who is under the command of a superior, who has orders to obey and duties to complete to the satisfaction of their commanding officer. ... *Therefore*, as Christians, we are to pray for them. Their

task is mighty. Their obligations before God are crucial. ... Pray for those in authority ... What ought you to pray for? ... You pray **I Tim. 2:2** For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. ... What does that mean? Well, the basis for a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty is to know Christ as Saviour and Lord ... Pray for their salvation ... for the salvation of those whom God has ordained to be our leaders. There is none of them beyond being saved! ... I would not be surprised to see Nebuchadnezzar in Heaven ... and look what kind of an evil man he had been!

These people who lead our governments are people who need the Lord so that they govern righteously ... and they are people whom the Lord can save, so pray for them! ... Pray for their salvation, for their hearts to be opened to the Gospel, and for the laws they make to be in accordance with God's Word ... And also give thanks to God for those who are already His and who He has put into those positions of power, that they would stand up for Him and be faithful unto Him ... that their allegiance to Him would be greater than their allegiance to their political party!

That is what the Lord is teaching us here. That is the influence we have, as Christians in our nation. That is the responsibility God sets before us. We are to be subject to those powers He has put in place, and He tells us we are to pray for them ... and how they need the sincere and earnest prayers of God's people in these very desperate and confusing times! Amen.