

PAUL'S TEACHING ABOUT CIVIL GOVERNMENT
PHILIPPIANS 3:20; ROMANS 13:10-7

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Last Monday was the tenth anniversary of the civil war which began in Syria. (PROJECTOR ON--- SYRIA MAP) The revolt there was part of the Arab Spring, the movement which began in the Middle East in 2010 when protestors in several Arab countries began a push to have more democratic freedoms. In Syria the movement began with peaceful protests. But the protests were quickly met with a strong government reaction.

Bashar al-Assad (BASHAR AL-ASSAD) has been president of Syria since 2000. He is an evil man. He has used chemical weapons against his own people. He has had his army drop barrel bombs on civilians. There is evidence that he has been responsible for the bombing of hospitals. Human rights advocates claim that he has ordered the killing of 11,000 people whom his government forces have detained.

The forces arrayed against Bashar al-Assad's government have been many. (PROJECTOR OFF) It has been extremely complicated to keep track of all of the opposition groups. Most of you will remember ISIS, that radical group that was beheading its enemies, including Christians. For a while they controlled a wide swath of eastern Syria. Other countries have been involved to varying extents, including the US and Turkey and Russia and Iran. Because Russia became very involved, the forces of rebellion have been pretty much defeated.

So has the rebellion been worth it? Out of a total population of 23 million people an estimated 500,000 Syrians have died. About half of those surviving have lost their homes and have been forced to move. Millions have fled the country. Many have ended up in Europe. Eighty per cent of the people in Syria today are living in poverty.

Before the war about ten per cent of the people in Syria identified themselves as Christians. Most of them had a connection with Eastern Orthodox groups. Some of their leaders have been killed. Many Christians have fled the country. At least 120 church buildings have been destroyed or seriously damaged. Before the war Christians were largely free of persecution. Because al-Assad is from a minority Muslim group called the Alewites, he wanted the support of religious minorities.

So how are Christians supposed to look at civil governments which are led by people who are evil? We are going to look at the New Testament today to see what help we can get in our perspective toward civil government. We looked last week at Jesus' interaction with the governing officials of His day. The main takeaway that I hoped that you would get is that civil government and the rule of God have separate spheres of operation. Civil government is a divine institution which has a legitimate sphere of

operation that extends to justice and paying taxes and even public health. For the follower of Jesus, obedience to God should always have first place. When the state tries to claim sovereignty over those matters that belong to God, then we do need to disobey. But at times in history the church has also sought to dominate the state in an unhealthy manner.

I.

Now we are going to look at what the Apostle Paul has to say about civil government. There are two key passages on that subject in the New Testament. We are first going to look at PAUL ON CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. PAUL ON CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP) The key passage here is Philippians #3 v. 20. We are going to consider the background and setting for the whole book. But first let's look at the key verse. In #3 v. 20 (PHILIPPIANS 3:20) Paul writes, **"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ..."**

Paul had earlier visited the Greek city of Philippi with his fellow missionary Silas. This was their first stop on their first foray into Europe. (PHILIPPI MAP) So this was a key milestone in the expansion of Christianity. Acts #16 provides the details of their visit to the city. After the gospel gained some traction, they ran into opposition from the governing authorities. They were beaten and thrown into jail without a hearing, which was against Roman law because Paul was a Roman citizen. (PHILIPPI SATELLITE) The Lord miraculously intervened and the jail doors were opened in an earthquake. The jailer was about to kill himself for fear that all of the prisoners had escaped. Paul stopped him and explained the gospel, and the jailer and his family were converted. They put their trust in Jesus as their personal Savior. Soon after that the two missionaries left town. But a church had been started in Philippi.

Ten or twelve years later Paul was a prisoner in Rome under house arrest. It was in that situation that he wrote this letter to the church in Philippi. Our particular interest is #3 v. 20. (PHILIPPIANS 3:20) The word translated here as "citizenship" is not the usual term for citizenship. It is not the word that is used in the Book of Acts to describe Paul's status as a Roman citizen. Instead Paul uses a word here to describe a different situation. Some of the largest cities of the first century Roman Empire had residents who came from other parts of the world. These residents tended to live together in a particular section of the city. We have a little of that in Las Vegas. There is the historic West Side, which is an African American community. We have a small Chinatown section. There are also some Hawaiian areas and so on.

Jews were one of these groups of immigrants found in many Roman cities. Alexandria, Egypt, for example, was well known for its large Jewish population, which had its own local government. The word that Paul used in our verse was the same one that was used to describe resident aliens like these. Resident aliens were members of a community who lived in a city that was, in some ways, not really their own. That is an accurate description of Christians, who have ultimate loyalties toward a place that is not in this world.

This term for citizenship also had special significance to the Philippians. For Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that it had special privileges not available to most towns and cities in the empire. Philippi had a form of government based on the kind used in the city of Rome. It operated on the basis of Roman law. A majority of its residents were also Roman citizens. Yet they were a long distance from Rome, and many of the Philippian citizens had never visited and never seen the object of their ultimate loyalties. That imagery also pictures our status as Christians. For we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom that we have not yet visited or seen. Yet that place is the object of our ultimate loyalties.

Do you ever feel at work or at school or in the neighborhood or even in your family gatherings perhaps that you don't quite really fit--- that you don't totally belong? If you feel that way, thank God. You don't fit in. For we Christians are resident aliens. There is an old spiritual that puts it this way: **"This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through. My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue."**

This principle of heavenly citizenship has great implications for our understanding of our relationship to civil government. As we will see in a moment from the next passage, as we saw last week in Jesus' statement to his accusers in Luke #22, we do have a certain loyalty and responsibility to civil government. But our first responsibility is to our heavenly kingdom, the kingdom of God. For first and foremost, we are citizens of heaven. The God of heaven should have our first loyalty.

This has implications for our political involvement. It is good for Christians to be involved in the political process. We are supposed to function as salt and light in our world. Our governing structures need salt and light right now. It is fine for us to have some connection to the Libertarians or the Republicans or the Democrats. But in those political involvements we need to remember our first loyalty. We need to be Libertarians light or Republicans light or Democrats light. For human institutions will always fall short.

At heart we need to be kingdom independents. Samuel Rodriguez is the president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. He is also a pastor in Sacramento. He writes, **"...we can't be married to the agenda of the donkey or the elephant--- we must exclusively be married to the agenda of the Lamb."** (*World*, 3/21/2021) Our primary citizenship is in heaven. Our first loyalty should lie in that direction.

II.

The second New Testament passage authored by Paul which we are going to consider is Romans #13 vv. 1-7. (p. 948) Here we will deal with PAUL ON CHRISTIAN SUBMISSION TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT. (II. PAUL ON CHRISTIAN SUBMISSION...)
There is general recognition that this New Testament book was written by the Apostle Paul at the end of his third missionary journey from Corinth in Greece to the Christians in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Paul had never been to Rome. (CORINTH ROME MAP) This was about six years before Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians.

He would end up as a prisoner in Rome. Church tradition says that he was martyred there.

A.

In the first part of v. 1 of Romans 13 we learn that THE CHRISTIAN'S BASIC RESPONSIBILITY IS OBEDIENCE. (II. A. THE CHRISTIAN'S BASIC RESPONSIBILITY...) The apostle writes, "**Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.**" Philippians #3 reminds us that our first allegiance is to God's heavenly kingdom. But our default mode, our normal attitude toward civil government should be obedience.

Paul uses the term "subjection." That was originally a military term. It meant "to rank under." In the Book of Ephesians the same verb is used to describe the responsibility that Christians have in various relationships: wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters. To be subject to someone means to be obedient to them. But it means more than that. It implies an attitude that includes a certain respect and honor. It implies recognition of a certain God-ordained hierarchy.

Notice what this command in v. 1 of #13 does not say. It does not say, "Be subject to good governing authorities." It does not say, "Be subject to governing authorities in democratic countries." It does not say, "Be subject to governing authorities in countries favorable to Christians." It does not say, "Be subject to governing authorities on the national level." By implication all levels of government from the local police to the governor to the president or king are included within the scope of this responsibility.

In order to appreciate the significance of this exhortation it is important to have some understanding of the context in which Paul was writing. This letter was written to Christians who were living in Rome in the first century AD. Some of them were Jews by background. Paul was Jewish, as was Jesus. The Jews knew that they were intended to have Jews ruling over them. They were familiar with the qualifications for a Jewish king which we looked at in Deuteronomy #17. But for several hundred years the Jews had been living under Gentile rule. Followers of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, had been exposed to Jesus' teaching that the Roman Emperor, pagan and Gentile who he was, still deserved a certain obedience.

It was about 56 or 57 AD when Paul penned this letter. Nero was emperor at the time. During his rule abortion and infanticide were common and accepted. Scholars estimate that about a third of the residents of the Roman Empire were slaves. Some slaves were treated very well and served as professional people like doctors and advisors to governing officials. Some slaves were treated badly. Homosexuality was regarded as a legitimate practice. Roman emperors were frequently treated as gods.

At the time when Paul wrote this letter, Nero was not giving much attention to Christians. But in a few years he would begin a major persecution of the Christians in Rome. In 64 AD there was a huge fire that burned about two-thirds of the city of Rome.

Nero blamed the Christians for it. He then proceeded to commit horrible atrocities against them.

Yet two years after that Paul included this note in the New Testament Book of Titus. (TITUS 3:1) **“Remind them [Christians under the care of Titus] to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work...”** The command to be in subjection to the governing authorities stands.

B. 1)

From the middle of v. 1 through v. 5 we have THE REASONS FOR OBEDIENCE. (II. A. B. THE REASONS FOR OBEDIENCE) The first of these is that CIVIL GOVERNMENT IS A DIVINE INSTITUTION. From the middle of v. 1 through the middle of v. 2 Paul writes, **“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed...”** We have already noted that both civil government and the family are divine institutions. We saw that taught in the early part of the Book of Genesis. We may not have specifically pointed it out yet, but the church is also a divine institution.

I earlier noted that civil government gets into trouble when it tries to dominate those other two institutions. I pointed out how China is seeking to totally suppress the church. In our nation we have reason to be concerned in several areas. One area is that civil government is seeking to change the nature of marriage. When it goes against the directions of the Divine Manufacturer, there are bound to be negative consequences. In some states we have seen government seek to put tighter restrictions on churches than on businesses in regard to the pandemic..

At the same time, this part of our passage reminds us that God is sovereign over all governments. He ultimately is responsible for the people who end up in office. So we need to be careful about disobeying civil authorities.

Two weeks ago we looked at Daniel and how he operated in the Babylonian Empire. For much of his life Nebuchadnezzar was the ruler of the country. He was a pretty bad guy. He killed a lot of people. He was responsible for burning down the temple in Jerusalem. Yet Daniel treated him with a certain respect and was able to have influence over him. In #2 v. 21 (DANIEL 2:21) of his book he said this, **“He [God] changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings...”**

But what about the bad rulers of the world? Are Christians supposed to submit to Fidel Castro and his brother, Kim Jong-un, Nero, Ayatollah Khomeini? The answer of this passage seems to be “yes.” They may give orders that would have us go against God’s directives. In those situations we must disobey. But still it seems that we need to have a default position of submitting to the governing authorities. Submission to them is not based upon their merit. When we don’t do that, verse 2 says that we are resisting God’s will.

This does not mean that Christians should not speak the truth. It does not mean that Christians should disobey God. It does not mean that Christians in a democracy cannot vote bad leaders out of office. But it certainly seems to preclude Christians from leading, or participating in, a revolt against the governing authorities.

2)

The second reason for obedience, according to the middle of v. 2 through v. 4 is that **DISOBEDIENCE PRODUCES NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES**. (B. 1) 2) **DISOBEDIENCE PRODUCES NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES**) In the second part of v. 2 Paul writes, **“and those who resist will incur judgment.”**

The first issue is: Whose judgment is incurred as a result of resisting the governing authorities? Is it the judgment of the governing authorities, or is it the judgment of God which is in view? The original Greek word used here appears five other times in Romans. In four of those instances the judgment of God is in view. I suspect that such is the case here. Paul's main concern is for Christians to do what is right before a sovereign God. Failing to be subject to the governing authorities will produce judgment from God. That judgment may come, at least in part, from the response of the governing authorities.

The Jewish resistance to Gentile authority came to a head in 66 AD, ten years after Paul wrote these words. The Jews in Judea organized a revolt against the Romans. They had some initial success. But the Romans sent in additional troops and killed thousands of Jews. They sent others into exile. In 70 AD they burned the temple in Jerusalem. It has yet to be rebuilt. Part of the reason for this judgment was the refusal of the Jews to submit to the governing authorities.

In v. 3 Paul points out that governing authorities serve an important function in society: **“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval...”** Governing officials maintain order. In even the worst governments that we might imagine there is usually a certain measure of law and order. Such was the case in Syria. Christians and other religious minorities had a certain protection.

Verse 4 says that God sees the civil authorities as His servants: **“...he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.”** Literally the term for “servant” is “deacon.” These deacons “bear the sword.” This terminology is associated with capital punishment. The sword in the hands of a government official was used to execute criminals. So there is an implied approval here for capital punishment. We saw back in our look at Genesis #9 that there is a basis for that ultimate exercise of justice by government.

Just prior to this chapter Paul told Christians that they should not take upon themselves the task of carrying out vengeance upon their enemies. That restriction does not apply to the state. Civil government has an obligation to punish those who violate its laws.

Verse 4 calls these governing authorities “God’s servant for your good.” The problems arise when government does not approve of what God calls good, and when government approves of what God calls bad. What then? Paul does not speak here about exceptions to the Christian responsibility to submit to government. We have looked at some of those exceptions earlier in our study. We will look at some next week. Still our normal position should be to submit to the governing authorities.

3)

Verse 5 provides a third reason why we should obey civil government. OUR CONSCIENCE SHOULD ENCOURAGE OBEDIENCE. (B. 1) 2) 3) OUR CONSCIENCE SHOULD ENCOURAGE OBEDIENCE) According to v. 5, **“Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”**

It is the morally correct thing to do to submit to civil authorities. The New Testament directs Christian wives to be subject to their husbands. That does not mean that when a husband tells a wife that she should do something which is a clear violation of Scripture, she should do it. But at the same time the Bible indicates that a good wife should maintain a certain respect for her husband because he is her husband.

The Apostle Peter described this same responsibility to be subject to government in his first epistle. (1 PETER 2:13-14) He wrote, **“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.”** Peter is making it clear that the duty to submit to governing authorities applies not just to national leaders but also to more local leaders of government.

C.

Finally, in vv. 6 & 7 of our passage, we come to THE EVIDENCE OF OBEDIENCE. (II. A. B. C. THE EVIDENCE OF OBEDIENCE) Paul writes, **“For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”**

Back in v. 4 Paul used a Greek word to describe the civil authorities that is sometimes translated as “deacon.” In v. 6 he uses a different word. It is translated here as “ministers of God.” The original Greek word was used to describe priests who served in the temple. So this is perhaps an even stronger term to show the connection which civil authorities have to God’s authority behind them. We so often tend to regard government and its leaders as our opponents. The Bible’s perspective seems to be that they are His God-ordained instruments.

The main thing to notice in this section of the passage is that subjection to governing authorities will be demonstrated in practical ways. It will be demonstrated in willingly paying taxes to fund the civil government. We may think that taxes are a complicated

pain, and they may indeed be that. But in the Roman Empire first century residents had to deal with income taxes, head taxes, poll taxes, road taxes, wagon taxes, crop taxes, import taxes, export taxes, harbor taxes, bridge taxes, and more. Paul tells them, and he tells us, that we need to pay them.

Verse 7 also adds that respect and honor are due to our governing authorities. Nero and most of the other emperors of that day were pretty nasty people. Many of them claimed to be gods and desired popular worship. Christians could not worship them, but still they were to show respect to these men, if not for their character, at least for the position which they held. So it should be today. We may not respect the character or the policies of many who hold government offices in our day. But we are nevertheless obligated as Christians to show a certain honor and respect to these men and women for the positions which they hold. One practical evidence of that is a commitment to pray for them in some kind of regular fashion.

Godly people in the Bible understood this principle. God appointed David to replace Saul as king of Israel. But David would not take advantage of opportunities that he had to kill Saul, despite the fact that he was evilly treated by Saul and had to spend several years of his life fleeing and hiding out from Saul who tried to kill him. Daniel and his three friends were hauled off from Israel by the pagan Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. At one point the king ordered the execution of Daniel's three friends for their refusal to worship him. Yet they submitted to his authority. Likewise Paul would not back down on his Christian commitment, but he also submitted himself to the governing authorities of his day. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Mark Pryor was a two term US senator from the state of Arkansas. He identifies himself as an evangelical Christian. Before his service as a senator, Pryor was the attorney general of Arkansas. At one point a federal court judge ordered him to remove a monument containing the Ten Commandments that was on federal property. He did. In response to a question from an interviewer he said, **"This was not a tough call. I believe that our freedom depends on the rule of law. The reason the American experiment has been successful is because we're a nation of laws and not of men. No person is above the law. We have to abide by the law even when we disagree with it."** (*World*, 9/13/2003) Such seems to be the message of the Apostle Paul.