

BIBLICAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: What Is It?

CHAPTER 16

Understanding Justice and Governing Authorities

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This final chapter will feature a Bible study from Romans 13:1-7. Not many passages in the New Testament directly address civil government as it impacts all citizens, including those who self identify as Christians. This text does not address Biblical justice or social justice. It addresses the principle of civil justice. This study will focus on citizens of the United States. Let's first read the text,

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. 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. 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. (Romans 13:1-7)

There are two key questions to address from the context of the country in which you are a citizen. For myself, that would be the United States:

- 1) What are the governing authorities?
- 2) Who is God's minister?

It is first important to understand context. One of the rules of Bible hermeneutics, or Bible interpretation, is to determine context. To whom did the apostle Paul write? What is the original, intended, plain meaning of this text? We must first begin with the fact that Paul wrote a letter in the First Century to Christians who were at Rome. These were

people living under the government of the Roman Empire. The unelected emperor of Rome at the time of the Apostle Paul was Nero.

In Paul's day there was no government in the world anything like the United States of America, certainly not the Roman Empire. There was no government “of the people, by the people, for the people” as Abraham Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address.¹ The Preamble of the United States Constitution reads:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

When Paul wrote, “*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,*” we can understand the following:

1. Within our national context, *governing authorities* cannot be one person. No single president, senator, representative, governor, judge, or mayor represents governing authorities, because our form of government is pluralistic, as outlined in the Constitution by three co-equal branches of government: executive, legislative and judicial.
2. The United States was not designed to be a monarchy ruled by a king/queen or a dictatorship ruled by a dictator.
3. The United States is an exercise of self-government.
4. No person in the government of the United States is appointed by God. The people choose government leaders. Others in government may be appointed by people.
5. For United States citizens, the Biblical sense of “governing authorities” is the entire system of government at every level, federal, state, and local.
6. “For there is no authority except from God.” “He is God's minister.” This does not refer to a single person acting alone of his/her will apart from our Constitution and

¹ Lincoln, A. (1863). *Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln*. National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?doc-date=1119>

laws. The proper context is the “principle” of authority, which must be exercised according to laws and the United States Constitution.

7. Persons have authority, but no one is *the* authority.
8. The Bible does not grant any person in the United States special authority or power.

Romans 13:2-3 reads, *“Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil.”*

This Scripture does not authorize law enforcement persons, such as police officers, who are not governing authorities, to shoot people who fail to comply or speak to them disrespectfully. They are certainly authorized by laws and rules of engagement (not by the Bible) to defend themselves and protect citizens.

In the United States we do not have “rulers” because we choose our political leaders. There is no lawful swift “judgment” in this country because our Constitution provides “Due Process.”

Amendment XIV

Section 1.

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

In fact, police officers do not qualify as governing authorities under our system of government. They are law enforcement officials, not “avengers” who “execute wrath” as described in Romans 13.

Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions erred in quoting the Bible to defend his President’s policies in separating migrant children from their families at the U.S.- Mexico border.

I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order," Sessions said, when defending President Trump's "zero tolerance" immigration policy.²

It was an overreach and self-serving to use Scripture to justify enforcement of a “law” that didn’t exist, but worse to do so in support of his president’s policy, not the will of Congress and the People. In reality, it is quite disingenuous for men to create a law and then say it is a law that God requires one to obey. This has occurred in our past where it was illegal for Black people to have lunch at a whites-only restaurant. The violation of which would have gone against “The ordinance of God” from Romans 13 in someone's view at that time

In the United States we accept the responsibility to voluntarily obey laws. It is part of our self governing philosophy. We also choose to suffer consequences for disobeying laws.

Paul wrote, “For there is no authority except from God.” He did not write this in support of the Roman Empire, but in support of the principle of “governing authority,” which is necessary within society. In reality the Apostle Paul knew that people within the government of the Roman Empire were pagan and engaged in idolatry.

In Rome, government wasn't just absolute, it was literally divine. "Roma" was a goddess; all public offices were also religious offices; and executions for high crimes were sacrifices to the gods.³

In our system of government and jurisprudence, magistrates, courts, constitutions, laws, statutes, and due process are our “authorities” “ministers” and “avengers.” Paul wrote;

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. For he is God’s minister to you for good. (Romans 13:3-4)

² Gobry, P. (2018). *What the Bible really says about government*. The Week. <https://theweek.com/articles/779283/what-bible-really-says-about-government>

³ Ibid.

Again, individuals are not authorized by the Bible or by United States law to be “The Authority.” We certainly respect all of our civil servants and government officials, but we know that some of them are not “a terror to evil” because some do evil themselves. Within our system, we have the means to remove such people. If their authority was solely from God, they could not be removed.

As stated in an earlier chapter, when Christians mis-apply the force of their religious convictions on civil government it creates confusion and a distortion of both the Christian faith and the role of government.

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.
(Romans 13:6-7)

Citizens shared in the expense of government and the services of government to fellow citizens. We respect public servants because they are part of “governing authorities,” and public servants respect the citizenry who made it possible for them to serve. Again, in America we have self-government and we are enjoined by God to submit to it. Submission may not always include obedience. For example, Rosa Parks disobeyed a “lawful” instruction to give up her seat at the front of the bus. However, she remained submitted to government and to God.

Reflection Questions

1. What are 1-2 of the biggest misconceptions about Romans 13?
2. What are the “governing authorities?”
3. How does the U.S. Constitution form of voluntary self-government fit within Romans 13?
4. How does “There is no authority except from God” fit within our system of elections, powers of impeachment, and man-made laws?