

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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Chapter 21 -

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE STATE

Romans 13:1-14

In discussing man's duty to GOD, Paul covers two passages: the Christian's duty to the State and the Christian's duty to all men. It is interesting that nearly every commentator asks, why does the Apostle introduce this explicit statement concerning human government in this passage of Romans? They suggest several reasons for these first six verses concerning the Christian's duty to the State.

First, he was certainly familiar with that segment of the Jewish population which was rebellious toward any Gentile government. They took very seriously the admonition in Deuteronomy 17:15 that "**one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee,**" and that they should not "**set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother.**" This attitude, for example, was the basis for the question brought to JESUS concerning the legitimacy of taxes to Caesar, in response to which our LORD requested a coin and asked, "**Whose is this image and superscription?**"

They answered, "**Caesar's.**"

He replied, "**Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.**"

Paul does not say any more or less in this particular passage than is implicit in JESUS' answer. This is one of the legitimate dichotomies of life for the Christian, and there is no reason to assume that there will not often be tension at this point; if we try to escape the tension, we may be in danger of disobeying our LORD as well as Paul's admonition. Incidentally, there is no particular virtue in a life free of tension, a fact which the cult of peace of mind tends to overlook. One may become as a vegetable with peace of mind as his goal.

Secondly, the Apostle Paul knew that then, and through history, there would be perennially in the Church that strain of Christian opinion which took the position that it is wrong to give allegiance to any earthly kingdom on the ground that we owe allegiance only to the KING of Kings. I suppose on this basis in every generation there have been those Christians who have not taken seriously human government. It is quite possible also that though Christians were not in radical disfavor at this time, Paul appreciated with prophetic insight that they would soon be

persecuted rather than protected by the Roman government. Especially could persecution be expected from the Jewish quarter, where Paul could see even then a cleavage coming between Jew and Christian.

What he says here concerning the Christian's duty to the state flows out of the last three verses of the 12th chapter, **"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 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. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."**

As a matter of fact, thousands of Christians have laid down their lives in an economy which persecuted them, even to death. That was true shortly after Paul's ministry. It was really in a sense true of Paul himself, for he spent his last years in prison; many of his epistles were written from this prison. But at any rate, it was true of the heroes of faith down through the centuries. One thinks of Daniel in the lion's den; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace; of Joseph in prison, and many other such examples. It is not uncommon for the children of GOD to leave vengeance with the LORD, and we are so admonished by the Word of GOD.

There is a third probability why Paul wrote what he did here; namely, that he, perhaps more than any contemporary of his, appreciated the achievements of the Roman government. He traveled the Roman roads, knew their amazing lines of communication. As a student of history he knew there had never been an empire like Rome which had brought peace to the whole world. To be sure, it was a peace enforced by Roman legions everywhere, nevertheless it was a kind of peace that the world never previously had known. There was an element of security even for slaves in this economy; the Apostle would appreciate this and recognize the Christian's obligation to such a government. Certainly Paul himself on more than one occasion appealed to Caesar and enjoyed the protection of the Roman government.

I believe there is a fourth reason for Paul's instruction in verses 1 through 6 of the 13th chapter. He was writing to Christians in Rome, followers of CHRIST living in the Eternal City. This would be like somebody anywhere else in the United States writing to believers in Washington, D. C. What would be more natural than that they should urge upon the people of GOD living in the capital city the kind of allegiance to the government that would be a testimony and witness for JESUS CHRIST and would commend the faith to those who were in authority. I am very sure this too was in the mind of Paul as he wrote. What he was saying in fact is this, Christians ought to be better citizens than anybody else. This is elementary.

The instruction given in Romans 13 must be taken in the light of the foundation for all of Christian ethics found in the first two verses of Romans 12. **"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of GOD, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto GOD, which is your reasonable service. 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."** This is basic to a Christian's relationship to the state. What Paul is saying here is this: you maintain allegiance to the State, not simply for the sake of the State but for GOD's sake. In the same way, for example, he instructed the family in Ephesians, saying, **"husbands love your wives... wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands,"** for CHRIST's sake. The same concern governs the parent-child relationship and the

servant-master relationship. In other words, my relationship to the state, to all men, my relationship to my wife, hers to me, ours to our children, theirs to us; the relationship of a manager and a laborer is always to the glory of GOD in the Christian economy.

He closes this passage with a warning, in the light of which the admonition Paul gives ought to be taken, "**The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.**" These first six verses in which Paul sets forth the divine right of the State are very plain, lending themselves to no ambiguity; one who tries to make these words mean something else does so to his own dissatisfaction and judgment. It is possible, but probably unfair, to make Paul say more than he really intended. Certainly he was not defending the right of corruption in civil affairs.

He was not defending tyranny in any form. It is clear in verses 3, 4 and 5 that the Apostle comprehends the State to be an instrument of GOD in the world for good and against evil. He is speaking against anarchy and for order in human affairs. He is saying that GOD has instituted government for this purpose.

To be sure, men will abuse and misuse the institution of the State just as men because of sin have abused and misused every other institution in history including the Church of JESUS CHRIST; but this does not mean that the institution is bad or that it should be forsaken. It simply means that men are sinners and rebels in GOD's world, and this is the way they behave with good institutions. As a matter of fact, it is because of this very sin that there must be human government to maintain order in history until the final and ultimate rule of JESUS CHRIST is established. Human government is better than anarchy, and the Christian must recognize the "divine right" of the State.

As has already been said, the language is very plain. "**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,**" therefore "**Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.**" There it is. "All authority is of GOD!" "**There is no power but of God.**" "**The powers that be are ordained of God,**" and the Christian is bound to give to these authorities proper recognition. So speaks the Word of GOD. Paul does qualify in verses 3, 4 and 5 the position and function of civil authority, "**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: 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. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.**" Three times the apostle calls human government the servant (minister) of GOD; the servant of GOD to protect the good; the servant of GOD to punish the evil, and - verse 6 - the servant of GOD for the purpose of collecting taxes.

Now, someone says, this certainly qualifies human government. What if a government is a terror to good and encouragement to evil? There are really three answers to this: One is that there are Christians in history who have suffered this kind of government to their own martyrdom and to the glory of GOD. I have met, for example, dedicated Christians who live in East Germany. I have no doubt about their faith in JESUS CHRIST. I know men who have had fellowship with

faithful Christians in Moscow. I have heard the story of at least one dedicated pastor in China who has been kept in solitary confinement for years because of his faith in CHRIST, the witness of whose life has gone throughout China.

A second answer is that many governments are so constituted that the people have some recourse. There are at least forty million Americans that have no right to complain about the present Administration because they did not vote in the Presidential election. This is almost incredible; all of these forty million were not bad people; I am sure there were many good people among them; there were probably many Christians among them, but it was inconvenient to vote on that day; the weather was inclement, or time could not be arranged, so they simply did not go to the polls. Four out of ten American citizens who had the right to vote failed to do so, and in failing, sealed their lips against any criticism of the status quo.

A third possible answer is, implicit in this passage, what we might call "the right of revolution." There is the right to disobey when the government imposes upon man that which is contrary to the rule of GOD in human conscience. When the authorities forbade the disciples to preach the Gospel, they said, "**We ought to obey God rather than men,**" and they continued to preach. In the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition we hold that only GOD is the LORD of the conscience, and we ought to be thankful for this. It introduces into Presbyterianism many problems because it leads to strong individuality and great diversity, but it is a safeguard to private judgment. It would be much easier to impose upon people the will of a government, whether it be ecclesiastical or political. Only GOD is the Lord of the conscience; therefore, when the State imposes that which is contrary to the will of GOD in my life, I must obey GOD rather than man. The government of the United States of America is the product of that conviction.

Finally, the Apostle Paul makes it clear in verse 6 that we must pay taxes. Indeed, he says the State is the servant of GOD for this very purpose; and there is an interesting phrase here, "**for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.**"

verses 7 through 10, the Christian's duty to all men can be summed up in one wonderful four-letter word, L-O-V-E. "**Owe no man any thing, but to love one another.**" Paul is not simply referring to monetary debts but to all personal relationships for this paragraph begins with the phrase, "**Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.**" The point is that there is an order in human relationships which the Christian ought to recognize.

Never refuse to honor the one worthy of honor. Give a man honor who deserves honor, give a man respect who deserves respect. This is what Paul is saying. There is an attitude among Christians that tends to downgrade everybody to the plateau of mediocrity as they so often refuse recognition of leadership in the right sense. Paul insists we have a debt in this regard to honor the man who deserves to be honored; the "sour grapes" attitude is unworthy of the Christian though it is probably often the explanation for his refusal to honor the one who deserves to be honored. If it were possible to lift one group of words out of this passage and brand them in the hearts and minds of the people of GOD, I would pick this: "**owe no man any thing, but to love one another.**" Every man his due! There will never be a moment in your life when you do not owe love to men. This is one debt that can never be written off because GOD so loved that He gave all of heaven's glory for us. Indeed the Apostle Paul declares that whatever the commandment, it

is fulfilled in love.

An article in the *Christian Herald* concerned itself with one of the great tragedies of life, the problem of fathers who punish little babies until they kill them. In this context the author was discussing the importance of love in the home, and he said they have discovered that often malnutrition and bone disorders in babies are due to the lack of love from father and mother. "I am sure you are familiar with a little formula found in children's hospitals all over the world. TLC means 'tender loving care.' As I have walked through our children's hospital in Taegu, Korea, often I have seen written over a bed these letters, TLC. Any nurse who enters that room, when she has a minute, picks up that little body that may have been almost dead just the night before, fondles it and caresses it because it needs affection as much as it needs food." Even the softening of the cranium, stated this article, can be due to the lack of affection.

There are men and women who are starved for love, and Paul reminds us that we have a debt out from under which we can never get - to love men. But, you say, I do not and I cannot love men! Then recognize this as disobedience to the law of GOD; ask Him to forgive you and help you to do it. He can and will!

Paul closes this chapter with a warning. Wake up! Start living like Christians; stop living like pagans, for the time is short, "**knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep**" like children of night. "**The day is at hand,**" begin living like the children of the day because "**now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.**"

Nineteen hundred years ago Paul said that. If it was relevant then to the Christians of Rome, it is infinitely more relevant to us today because our salvation in this consummate sense is nineteen centuries nearer than when Paul issued the warning. Whether the coming of the Lord JESUS CHRIST is to be delayed for another hundred years, or whether He will come in the next twenty-four hours, it is incumbent upon every Christian to live as though He would return at any moment; for return He shall to reign in righteousness, and His advent will be at an hour men do not expect Him.

That we are living in a crucial hour of human affairs no thoughtful person will deny. It is an apocalyptic hour and it demands Christian citizenship in the finest sense; Christians who are strong and true and faithful, who are composed, and available and efficient. The man who will be invincible in the midst of coming events will be the one who expects the Son of GOD to return to reign in righteousness. Paul is urging, listen Christians, listen, this is your hour; stop living like godless men and start living like the people of GOD. "**But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.**"

There is the story of a little boy who, when the clock struck fifteen, with eyes as big as saucers breathlessly rushed into another room to his mother, crying, "Mommy, it's later than it's ever been before!" It is later than it has ever been before. Christian, what are you doing about it, for CHRIST's sake?

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