

WHAT DEFINES A GODLY CITIZEN?

Romans 13:1-7
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Paul has just come out of a section describing some powerful ways that the body of Christ can show love in the world, and how we should be relating both to our brothers and sisters, as well as our enemies! He is going to pick back up with the topic of love in 13:8, but in 13:1-7 he launches into a very succinct argument about how believers should relate to the governing authorities. At first glance the placement appears rather forced and unfitting, but it seems like he may have placed it here for two different reasons. First, he has spent a lot of time talking about not being conformed to the world, not acting like the world, and not thinking like the world anymore. And he gives command after command about how we can be following the law of *love*. It is possible that he brings our relationship to the worldly authorities in here, to remind us that even though we are under the law of Christ, we are still under worldly authorities and we have a duty to be Godly citizens. Secondly, this topic does flow out of the last section with regards to one of the ways God avenges us against our persecutors. Since we are clearly not allowed to “take justice into our own hands” (12:19) God shows us one of the ways that He will handle punishing evil. In this section Paul is going to show us what defines a Godly citizen.

SUBMISSION TO GOVERNING AUTHORITIES (13:1A)

Paul’s beginning exhortation is clear. We, as believers, are to submit to the governing authorities in our lives. We ought not to fall into the trap of thinking that now that we are submitted to God’s law in our lives, we no longer need to submit to our secular authorities. This idea of submitting is simply recognizing that each one of us is underneath, or subject to a ruling authority. As we read this truth, there will be a number of objections that will begin to surface, we will deal with some of those towards the end. But for now, let us remember that Paul is writing to believers in and under the authority of Rome, and he immediately answers the question we all have, “Why?”

RECOGNIZING THE SOURCE OF ITS AUTHORITY (13:1B-2)

Paul’s reason for our submission is just as clear as the call to submit. The governing authorities in our lives are put in place by God, and therefore they derive their authority from God. God has instituted the worldly governments and they function under His authority. Paul is most certainly NOT saying that all the things that secular authorities do around the world are Godly, it only takes one news cycle to know that fact. It is tempting to see the rise and fall of different authorities as simply the worldly cycle of power, where people are trying to get their hands on more and more power by whatever means they can. However, Paul would have us “transform” our way of thinking to recognize that the governments and rulers are under the control and authority of God. This is consistent with what Jesus said to Pilate at His trial, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:10-11) Though there is some mystery regarding God’s appointment and authority over the worlds governing authorities, the scriptures make it clear, God has set in place the authorities, and we, as those who seek to be Godly citizens, have a proper way to live in relation to these authorities, defined by obedience, which will result in us living free from fear.

LIVING FREE FROM FEAR (13:3-6)

The argument is easy to follow: the governmental authorities in our lives are placed there by God, we are to submit to them, and if we choose to have an attitude of opposition toward them, then we are opposing God’s appointed authority, and by extension we are opposing God’s will in our lives. The result of

behavior toward these authorities will either be defined by fear or freedom. Once again we see the phrase “do what is good” (see 12:2, 12:9) reminding us of God’s will for our lives. The authorities set laws for us to follow, and Paul makes it clear that we are to follow those laws. If we do, we will not live in fear of punishment, and we will receive commendation for our obedience if we don’t, not only will we be in fear of the authorities, but also we will be violating our own conscience which tells us what we are doing is wrong. Verse 4 ties back to the command in 12:19. One of the ways in which God brings His vengeance on evil is through the authorities that He has established. That includes punishment toward us if we decide to violate the laws placed over us. Though Paul doesn’t mention it, I think it is important here to address the question “When would God have us disobey His authorities?” Scripture is full of stories of those men and women who violated the law of the land in Godly opposition. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Paul, and the other apostles. The quick answer is that we as believers, should not follow any laws that *directly oppose God’s law for us*. As Peter said when he refused to obey the command for him to stop preaching about Jesus, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:27) All the examples above are of men who committed themselves to following all the laws of the land unless it specifically violated a direct law of God. That is the principle we must list by as well. If it became illegal to talk about Christ, or to pray, or to gather together in worship (as it is in many countries around the world) we would be right in echoing Peter’s words and rebellious behaviour. But, unless it directly violates God’s law for us, we need to seek to be in compliance with the laws of our land, even when we don’t like them and think that they are foolish, irrational and unnecessary. How better to close out this section than with turning toward taxes.

PAYING OUR DUES (13:7)

Paul wraps us this section with a clear and practical illustration of what this means for us as Godly citizens. We are to recognize the authorities as servants of God, and pay our dues. Taxes, revenue, respect and honor. These are the things that we owe to the authority that God has placed over our lives. This will be an easier or more difficult task depending on the character of any particular authority. But these authorities have been placed there by God, and God is going use them in His purposes whether or not they submit to God. As such they are His servants, and His servants over us, therefore God requires that we pay them what is due them.

As we recognize these truths about worldly authorities it changes the way we think and behave in relation to them. It is a freeing thing to think, that part of our “living, holy, acceptable sacrifice” is properly relating to our governing authorities. Yes of course there will be challenges and objections, but when we recognize that God is in control, and that He is ultimately the one who will make all things right and punish all evil, then we can freely live in subjection to governments despite their goodness or Godliness. Another result of us living out these truths, is that it will add extra force and weight to the times when we have to look the authority in the face and say “no, I will not do that because it is against God’s law.” If we have established ourselves to be honest and submitted Godly citizens, then our rebellion will be striking. Conversely, if we are rebellious, arrogant, and refuse to recognize these truths, not only will we live in fear of God’s wrath through His established authorities, but we won’t have a witness when the time comes to say “no” to the government. Regardless of how we feel about the governmental authorities in our lives, clearly, God is calling us as Godly citizens to submit to and be defined by these truths.