

# The Heart of the Matter:

## Lesson 15: The Christian's Attitude Toward Civil Government

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### 1. The Importance of Civil Rule

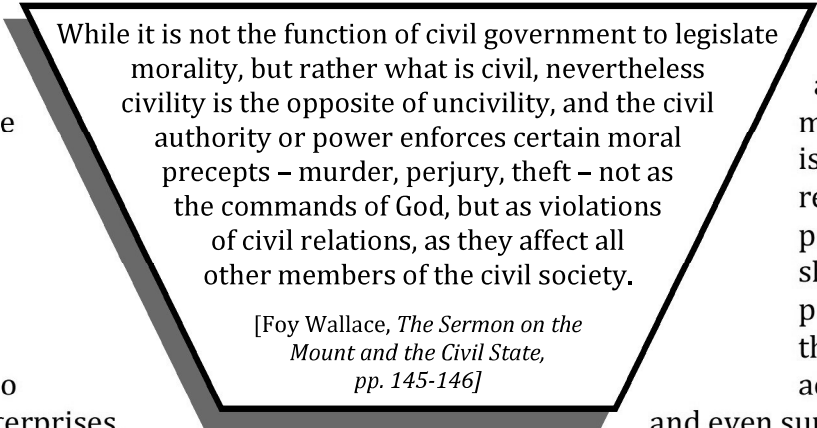
Recent world events illustrate a Biblical principle: man needs civil rule to combat violence, treachery and anarchy. To this end, God has not mandated any particular *form* of government such as democratic, monarchical or socialistic. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, organized crime has run rampant in Russia, for a powerful central government does not exist to curtail such enterprises.

While certain constraints, abuses and intrusions of government may aggravate us, we remember its overall value: *"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"* (Rom. 13:4).

Do we really want to live in a country without civil rule? Do we want to dilute the government's power to apprehend and prosecute the guilty in the name of "civil rights"? Would you rather trust in yourself alone to provide daily protection for you and your family? God knew we would not be up to the task: *"For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God ... for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil"* (Rom. 13:1, 3).

### 2. Submission to Civil Authority

The Jews chafed under Roman rule, and they were greatly dissatisfied at the idea of a Messiah who wouldn't take up arms and fight. The Jewish leaders tried to use this anti-Roman bias against Jesus, pitting popular hatred for Rome against the



While it is not the function of civil government to legislate morality, but rather what is civil, nevertheless civility is the opposite of uncivility, and the civil authority or power enforces certain moral precepts – murder, perjury, theft – not as the commands of God, but as violations of civil relations, as they affect all other members of the civil society.

[Foy Wallace, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Civil State*, pp. 145-146]

obligation to submit to civil authority. The most volatile issue in this regard was the payment of taxes: should the Jew pay Roman tax, thus acknowledging

and even supporting the oppressive regime? Jesus upholds the truth but softens the blow with a spiritual imperative: *"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"* (Matt. 22:21; cf. Rom. 13:6-7).

It is our obligation to submit to the ruling authority over us, whether federal, state, county or municipal: *"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him"* (1 Pet. 2:13-14). Paul offers two considerations:

1) If we rebel against civil authority, we will be subject to its penalties: *"But if you do evil, be afraid ..."* (13:4). If we are guilty of breaking the law, we are obligated to accept the punishment.

2) *"Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake"* (Rom. 13:5). Is it acceptable to

break the law so long as no one finds out? Not for the true Christian, for he still must face his conscience.

The Christian cannot be an anarchist; he cannot be flippantly dismissive of laws that exist for the welfare of society.

### **3. Respect for Civil Rulers**

Because government is ordained of God and serves a purpose in keeping with His will, Christians are directed to show due regard for those in power:

*"Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (1 Pet. 2:17).*

*"Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Tim. 2:1-2).*

Such respect does not nullify criticism of flawed policies or rebuke for immoral behavior. Even civil law permits the first, and God's law demands the second. But at the same time, we must show respect for the office – the authority and power – as ordained of God.

### **4. Uses and Abuses of Civil Power**

It is permissible to use certain rights granted by the government to protect oneself and further the cause of Christ. Paul, for example, appealed to Roman citizenship to avoid a beating he was about to receive (Acts 22:25-29). Paul also demanded vindication of his integrity by forcing Philippian officials to publicly release him from prison (Acts 16:35-39).

Not every right of civil government can be enacted on one's behalf, however. Paul forbade Christians to take one another to court to settle their differences (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Paul says, *"Now therefore, it is*

*already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another"* (6:7). Such impasses among Christians should not be settled before unbelievers, and to air our dirty laundry before them leaves a very negative impression.

God does not intend to wait until the judgment for all wrongs to be righted. The existence and function of civil government is to punish evildoers who threaten peace and civility among all. On this basis, it is entirely appropriate for Christians to press charges against lawbreakers or to sue in court for restitution and punitive judgments.

### **5. The Power to Execute Criminals**

What should the Christian's attitude be toward execution? Is it inconsistent with kingdom principles to advocate the death penalty? While some disagree, I believe Romans 13 upholds the right of civil government to take the life of certain criminals.

As was pointed out in the quote by Foy E. Wallace on p. 43, the civil government does not rule by principles given to the church. Yes, it is expected to be just and moral in the discharge of its duty, but it is a civil, not a spiritual, institution.

Some object to capital punishment: "Vengeance belongs to God, not men. He reserves the right to punish criminals as He sees fit." But this is the very point of Romans 13: God has seen fit to use civil power as the legitimate exercise of His wrath against evildoers. *"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"* (Rom. 13:4).

No individual has the right to exact his own retribution for evil done to him (Rom. 12:19-21). But civil government reflects the will of the community; it is society acting as a unit. When society's

standards recognize certain crimes to be so heinous and reprehensible that the perpetrator must forfeit his life, God permits it to be so. No, this does not justify any miscarriage of justice, for God expects any government to operate upon principles of fairness.

The imposition of a death penalty should not shock us; God incorporated capital punishment into the Law of Moses. The advances of society do not argue against capital punishment; rather, they enhance it. We are better equipped to identify the

guilty than ever before. Yes, mistakes can still be made, and the law is enforced unevenly at times. But if the mere existence of human foibles argue against the death penalty, they also argue against all punishment.

The main issue is: Is the death penalty harmonious with God's laws and His principles of the governance of the universe? The answer is "yes" according to Romans 13.

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### ***Questions for Discussion***

1. Does Paul object to capital punishment in Acts 25:11?
2. Discuss the right of a Christian to hold an elective office.
3. What rationales might a Christian use to justify breaking the law?
4. Is it sinful for a Christian to protest against laws they deem unfair?
5. Is it sinful for a Christian to vote for a president that is pro-abortion?
6. Should a Christian refuse to pay taxes because he feels it supports immoral practices?
7. When civil law violates God's law, what should the Christian do? Cite a verse.