

## Romans 13:1-7

### *Righteousness in Conduct, Focused on the Authorities*

#### A. Notes on the Text

##### **Verse 1**

"Everyone": Christian and non-Christian. God's laws are the same for both.

"Governing authorities": here Paul uses a word (*eks-oe-sia*) that means power, i.e. power which has been bestowed, authoritative power, hence, especially the power of an office bearer. Thus, when translating "powers" literally we can think of office bearers in world and church, who have been given authority. As we can see in the following verses (vv. 4 and 6, for instance: sword and taxes), the apostle is thinking specifically of worldly authorities.

"Governing": being placed over a person. God has placed some persons higher than others, as office bearers. God has appointed them, the authorities. They appeared in the course of history, for they did not yet exist in paradise or in the first few centuries thereafter. Then there were patriarchs (heads of families) who had authority. (See Glossary #25.)

##### **Verse 2**

Resistance, uprising and revolution are against God's will. A judgment on rebels means: sooner or later, during their lives, or certainly after their deaths, God will execute his judgment over their lives; they will be punished by God himself.

##### **Verse 3**

"Those who do right": those obedient to the authorities appointed by God.

"Those who do wrong": those disobedient to the government's laws.

"Received his approval" [RSV]: in ancient times it was customary to honour citizens who had behaved meritoriously toward the state or city by granting them a title or having their name engraved on an official plaque, or some similar honour. (cf. the modern idea of honorary citizens and other official awards of merit).

##### **Verse 4**

The government is in God's service for the good of the people. Literally, it is a deacon (servant) of God. That does not mean that an ungodly government realizes that it is a servant of the true God (how could it!), but Paul's point is: God and Christ use governments as servants (instruments) to govern the nations and execute God's plan for the church and the world, even if those governments are not aware of it. Christian governments will know that. (See, e.g. Isaiah 44:28 and

45:1, where the LORD calls the Persian king, Cyrus, his anointed and his shepherd; see also Proverbs 8:15; 21:1).

"To do you good": when the government understands its task, albeit imperfectly, it will ensure that law and order exist in society, to make public life possible and to protect its subjects.<sup>1</sup>

"He does not bear the sword for nothing": not only to protect and defend his subjects (for instance in a war of aggression), but also to right wrongs and punish criminals, if necessary by executing wrongdoers (Genesis 9:6). It seems to have been customary for magistrates in the Roman Empire to have a sword borne before them during court processions.

"Not...for nothing": not without meaning and purpose.

### **Verse 5**

"Therefore": because authority is as described above.

"One must be subject": it is essential, otherwise one's conscience begins to speak.

### **Verse 6**

"This is also why": because authority is as described above.

"Ministers of God"[RSV]: here the authorities are called ministers (*leitourgoi*), and not, as in v. 4, deacons (*diakonoï*). Ministers are servants of the nation; in the Greek Old Testament priests are called ministers. Thus, a minister is someone who works for the people. Compare our word, liturgy, which means: (a) the whole of the prescribed prayers, ceremonies and actions which together form a worship service; (b) the collection of songs, prayers, etc., used in the worship service; and (c) the book that contains such a collection. A minister is the leader of such a liturgy or worship service.

### **Verse 7**

"Everyone": all governing authorities of various levels.

"What you owe him": this includes more than what is mentioned; hence, also obedience to all laws and regulations. Taxes are specifically mentioned, because then, as now, attempts to evade them were probably numerous.

"Taxes" and "revenue": direct and indirect taxes.

## **B. Main Thoughts**

1. Regarding the connection with what precedes, you should note that the justified sinner lives as a believer in a tapestry of many relationships, both

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Note: For the task of the governing authorities, see Belgic Confession, Article 36; and also B. Holwerda, *De crisis van her gezag* (1947).

within and outside the church. In these he must be righteous, that is, keep God's commandments. Chapter 12:1-13 deals with the believer within the church; 12:14-21 with the believer in the world; while 13:1-7 deals specifically with the believer's attitude towards the authorities, hence, with the fifth commandment.

2. The text of 13:1-7 does not state whether the church members in Rome had difficulties with the (obedience to the) authorities, who were heathens. Neither does Paul speak about his pleasant or unpleasant experiences (see Acts 16:19-40; 17:1-9; 18:12-17; 20:21-38; 21:27ff.; chapters 22-26 and 28:16,31), or those of others (see Acts 12) with the Roman authorities, but instead he points to the rule of obedience.

The government is called a human institution in 1 Peter 2:13, while Romans 13:2 says that it is instituted by God. That is not a contradiction: Peter does not give its origin (human), but notes the sphere in which the government functions, viz. in human life.

3. The apostle leaves all kinds of questions unanswered. To mention a few: do we owe obedience to a government which has obtained power through a bloody revolution (such as the communist government in Russia)? When does obedience to a tyrannical government end according to Acts 4:19 and 5:29 (cf. the abjuration of Philip of Spain by the States of Holland in 1581)? May we resist an evil government with force, or should we always refrain from employing force and use only passive resistance (as for instance Gandhi did in India against the English government, and Bishop Dom Helder Camara in Brazil against the military regime [which ended in 1985])? How far should government concern itself with or meddle in people's lives through social legislation, such as health care insurance, social assistance, universal day care, and similar laws? Would Paul have had a preference for a certain form of government (monarchy, republic)?
4. It is well-known that Martin Luther (as well as Calvin and the other reformers) stressed civil obedience to all authorities. Calvin did recognize the right to rebel against the tyrant who prevents his subjects from serving God in accordance with his Word, but then only as a last resort. In such a case he wanted the lower magistrates to take the lead in rebellion against the ruler (cf. the alliance of the nobles against Philip II of Spain in Holland). Luther was of the opinion that in resisting the ruler one may never go beyond passive resistance, with immeasurable patient suffering. Generally, until the time of Hitler in Germany, it was considered good Lutheran practice to obey the authorities under any circumstances. Hence the ready acceptance of the aphorism "Befehl ist Befehl" (orders are orders: a subject must always follow the orders of his superior). That is also why, when Hitler interfered in the church in many ways, it was difficult to assume a believing attitude of resistance in the German church struggle. In books about the resistance in

the Second World War we can read about the many problems of the resistance movement and the people in it.

5. Paul leaves many questions unstated, both those that were of current interest at that time, and those that were not, in order to point out the heart of the matter: obedience and subjection to the governing authorities. In order to properly formulate a "doctrine of government and obedience to it" we must read more Scripture passages together, as is done in Belgic Confession, Article 36, and Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 39, (see proof texts there).
6. In 13:1 Paul uses the Greek term "*eks-oesia*" (see the Notes to v. 1), which also occurs in other places (see Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 2:4,5; 15:24-26; Ephesians 1:20ff.; 2:1ff.; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:16; 2:15). Usually it is translated as "powers". In some texts "powers" refers to a class of angels e.g. Ephesians 6:12). That is why some commentators are of the opinion that the powers in Romans 13:1 also refers to powers of angels, who stand behind the human governing powers. They argue that the LORD, using national guardian angels, controls government authorities (for these national guardian angels see Daniel 10:13,20, where the prince of the Persian empire is described as a demonic angel). Hence some see a connection between Romans 13:1 and Revelation 13, where the authorities are controlled by devils, by Satan.

In my opinion, just as people who are not rulers are influenced and inspired by good and bad angels, so also those who govern are influenced and inspired by them. Therefore, Romans 13:1 refers, in the first place to individuals. We should, however, note that especially persons in authority (both believing and unbelieving) are more easily influenced by wicked angels, even by Satan himself. History gives lots of examples!

7. Thus, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul emphasises this main command: be obedient to the authorities! And he demands this obedience to the government of the day, a government that was not very favourably disposed to the church of Christ. From this we learn to understand how resistance, rebellion and revolution are against God's express command also today. The Christian must show himself to be an obedient subject and must pray often for the authorities (1 Timothy 2:1ff.; 1 Peter 2:13ff).

There is plenty of literature about the authorities. (See the Reformed commentaries on Belgic Confession, Article 36).

Johannes Francke