

God's Strange Servants

by Ray C. Stedman

Our study in Romans has brought us to that famous passage in Chapter 13 that deals with the Christian and his relationship to the government. It isn't very hard to think of President Jimmy Carter as a servant of God. His personal profession of a new birth has been well publicized. But I wonder if you have ever thought of Leonid Brezhnev as a servant of God? Or Idi Amin? Or even Adolph Hitler? And yet the amazing thing that this passage declares is that men like that are, in some sense, servants of God.

I think this shows how much we need to have our minds renewed, our thinking changed, as the twelfth chapter of this letter tells us, in order that we will not be conformed to the thinking of the age. I find that those who are not Christians have great difficulty in thinking of governmental leaders who are tyrannical, vicious, or cruel, as, in any sense, being servants of God. And yet, if we Christians are going to conform our thinking to reality, i.e., proof as God sees it, this is what we must begin to think. We need to have our minds renewed to what the Scriptures say, and to think along those lines about the life around us, in order that we might be able to present our bodies available to God to use in whatever situation we find ourselves.

The first thing the apostle tells us about our government is **where it comes from**: Where does it originate? The answer is given in the very first verse:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. {Rom 13:1 NIV}

When Paul refers to *governing authorities*, he uses a phrase that can best be translated “the powers that be.” He is not just talking about heads of state; he is talking about all levels of authority, all the way down to the local dog-catcher. These are the powers that be, those that exist. He tells us that the thing we must think about these governmental offices is that they are, in some way, brought into being by God himself.

I often hear people ask, “Which form of government is the best? Which is the one God wants us to have?” We Americans would love to think that democracy obviously is the most God-honored form of government. But I don't think you can establish that from the Scriptures. In fact, the Scriptures reflect various forms of government. So when you ask, “Which government is the best kind? Is it a monarchy? An oligarchy (i.e., ruled by a few)? Is it a republic? A democracy?” The answer of Scripture is not necessarily any of these. It is whatever God has brought into being. That is best for that particular place and time in history. God has brought it into being, considering the makeup of the people, the degree of truth and light which is disseminated among them, and the moral conditions

that are prevailing. For that condition, for that time and place, God has brought into being a particular government.

Now, that government can change. God doesn't ordain any one form of government to be continued forever. If the people grow toward understanding of truth, and morality prevails in a community, the form of government may well take on a democratic pattern. Where truth disappears, government seems to become more autocratic. But, in any case, the point the apostle makes is that whatever form of government you find, God is behind it. Don't ever think of any state or any government as something that in itself is opposed to God, because it isn't. That includes Communism as much as any other form of government. That is the clear statement of this passage. I think we have to begin to clear our thinking along that line.

This truth is not confined to the New Testament. You find it in the Old Testament as well. In the book of Daniel, Daniel stood before one of the greatest monarchs the world has ever seen, one of the most autocratic of kings, and said to him, "God changes times and seasons, God removes kings, and he sets up kings," {cf, Dan 2:21a RSV}. There it is made clear that God definitely has a hand in whatever is going on on the earth at any particular time. Sometimes we are tempted, or even taught, to think of God as being remote from our political affairs, that he is off in heaven somewhere turning a rather morbid eye on us human beings struggling along with our political problems down here. But Scripture never takes that pattern. He is not on some remote Mount Olympus; he is right among us, involved in the pattern of governments; and he raises up kings and puts down others, raises up rulers and changes the form of government. The apostle clearly sets this before us in Romans 13.

I think we Americans are slowly learning that not every body of people in the world can handle democracy. There was a time when, naively, we thought democracy was the best (and only enlightened) form of government, and all we had to do was go around the world and set up democracies and people would begin to function properly. Democracy would solve all their problems. Now, after many painful experiences, we know better than that. We know there are times and places where democracy just won't work. It can't work; people aren't ready for it. They can't handle that kind of

liberty, that kind of responsibility. Therefore God doesn't give it to them. The government they have is better suited for their purposes than the one we have. We are slowly catching on to that.

When Paul wrote this letter to these Christians, they were living in the capital city of the empire, Rome itself. Rome by this time had already passed through several forms of government. It had been a monarchy, a republic, a principate, and now it was an empire. Nero had just begun his reign as the fifth emperor of Rome when Paul wrote this letter. What Paul is saying to these Christians is that whatever form of government may be in control, they are to remember that God is behind it.

Not only is God behind the forms of government we have, but he is also responsible for the incumbents, the ones occupying the offices at any particular time. That may be a startling thought for some of us, but that is what this verse says. Listen to the way the New English Bible translates the last half of Verse 1:

There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him. (Rom 13:1b NEB)

Not only are the forms of government brought into being by God, but the very people who occupy the offices are put there by God. So if you thank God for Jimmy Carter and say that God gave us a godly born-again President, remember that he also gave us Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and all the others that we have had some trouble with. They came from God too. You see, God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat. He is not a Socialist, or a Marxist, or even an American! The biblical picture is that God not only sends us good men sometimes, by his grace, to lead us and heal us, but also he sends us bad men at times, to punish us. And we deserve them. Therefore, when Hitlers, Stalins, and other ruthless individuals come to the throne of power, God has put them there because that is what that people needed at that particular time in history. This is the biblical position with regard to government, and it is rather startling. And yet, it is the clear statement of this passage.

You find this position supported by other passages of Scriptures:

- We read this morning the passage from First Peter which says we are to "honor the king,"

{1 Pet 2:17}. When Peter wrote this, Nero was the one who was seated on the throne. Christians are to be subject to the governing authorities, Peter tells us.

- In the book of Daniel we are taught the same thing. Nebuchadnezzar, that mighty monarch, had been brought low before God by God's dealings with him. In a great decree, which he had issued throughout his kingdom, he testified to that effect. He said God had taught him painful lessons "to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men," {cf, Dan 4:17 RSV}.

Isn't that remarkable? God sometimes deliberately picks a man that is not capable, the lowliest of men, and puts him into power. So the first thing we need to recognize is that, regardless of the form of government we may be up against, the hand of God is in it. And not only is this true of the form of government, but also of the very ones that occupy the positions of power. God has put them there.

The second thing we need to know about our relationship to our government is found in Verse 2:

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. {Rom 13:2 NIV}

Clearly, if God is behind governments, then **those who oppose the government and would overthrow it are really opposing God.** I realize this has to be handled very carefully, because there are those who would use a statement like this to justify everything the government does – no matter what it is. But we must recognize, first of all, that governments do have a God-given right to punish those who would overthrow them, to punish treason, to resist overthrow, to control riots, and to seek to preserve themselves in power by legitimate means. Governments do have that right. This the apostle makes very clear.

But, though Paul doesn't go into this side of it in this particular passage, we also must remember that Scriptures show us that such a right is always held under God. I thank God for the enlightened

soul, a few decades ago, that set in line a motion that added to our pledge of allegiance the words "under God." That reflects biblical truth. This nation exists as a nation under God. What that is saying, of course, is that nations are to recognize that they have limited power. They are agents of God, but they are not God.

There are some things that nations have no right to do, or governments have no right to get into. The Bible is clear on what those kinds of things are. This is what Jesus clearly referred to in that famous incident when he was asked about paying taxes. He took a coin and held it up and said, "Whose image is on the coin?" They said, "Caesar's." He said, "All right, then give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar; but give to God the things that belong to God," {cf, Matt 22:20, Mark 12:16-17, Luke 20:24-25}. By this he clearly indicated that there are limits to the power of government. Caesar has his image on certain things; therefore they belong to him – and rightfully so, Jesus is saying. What Caesar put his image on belongs to Caesar. By implication he extends this to the world of things.

Governments have authority over what we do with our property and how we behave with one another, but our Lord clearly indicates they have no right to touch what God has put his image on, which is the spirit of man. In other words, Caesar has no right to command the worship of man or forbid his obedience to the Word of God. Rulers are under God; therefore they have no right to command men to do what God says ought not to be done, or to command men not to do what God says should be done. These are the limits of governmental powers. Governments are not to enslave men, because men belong to God. Governments are not to oppress men, because men bear the image of God. What bears God's image must be given on to God, and not to Caesar – just as what bears Caesar's image must be given to Caesar, and not necessarily to God. And so I think that though this passage doesn't deal at length with this, it indicates clearly that believers have a right to resist oppression and religious persecution by nonviolent means, as they have opportunity, but they are not to resist the legitimate functions of government. We are to accept government as a gift of God.

The legitimate functions of government are further described for us in Verses 3 and 4, and also Verse 6:

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. {Rom 13:3 NIV}

Do you hear what Paul is saying? If you are driving down the freeway and want to be free from having to look constantly in your rear view mirror, then keep the speed down! The officer will pull you aside and say, "Sir, you were driving so beautifully that I just want to commend you." Well, no, he won't do that. He may wish he had time to, but he will just pass by and wave at you.

For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of justice to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. {Rom 13:4 NIV}

This is a very helpful passage, and it says that there are two basic functions of government. Governments are to protect us from evil. That is, they are to preserve the security of people. They are to protect us from attack from without and from crime from within. And for that purpose, governments properly have armies and police systems and courts of justice to preserve us from evil in our midst.

And then in Verse 6 we have another function of government:

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. {Rom 13:6 NIV}

Notice that in these three verses Paul calls government agents "the servants of God" three times. The first two times, in Verses 3 and 4, he uses a word in Greek from which we get our word *deacon*. They are the deacons of God. I don't suggest that the next time you pay your taxes you call the person who takes your money a deacon. But Scripture calls these governing agents deacons, for they are servants of God. The next time you are called up in traffic court, you must look at the judge as a deacon of God. He is a servant. The point these verses make here is that these things exist as an arm of God's work among men. It is

really the way God is doing things. Therefore, God is behind them.

This not only involves punishment of crime and wrongdoing, but also the commending of good. Governments are to honor those who live as good citizens. They offer rewards of various sorts for those who have a record of keeping the law. Occasionally you hear of such commendations or rewards.

Even the courts are set up to recognize the right motives of people. Not long ago I read about a man who was hauled into court because he had stolen a loaf of bread. When the judge investigated, he found out that the man had no job, his family was hungry, he had tried to get work but couldn't, tried to get funds for relief but couldn't, and so in order to feed his family he had stolen a loaf of bread. When the judge found out the circumstances, he said, "I'm sorry, but the law can make no exceptions. You stole, and therefore I have to punish you. I have to assess, therefore, a fine of ten dollars. But I want to pay the money myself." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a ten dollar bill, and handed it to the man. As soon as the man took the money, the judge said, "Now, I also want to remit the fine." That is, the man could keep the money. "Furthermore, I am going to instruct the bailiff to pass around a hat to everyone in this courtroom, and I am fining everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a man has to steal in order to have bread to eat." When the money was collected, he gave it to the defendant. That represents the good side of justice. A court that will, on occasion, recognize the right motives of people, even though there may be wrongdoing involved. That is a legitimate function of government. But the government also has the right to defend, to maintain an army and a police system and courts of law, and thus fulfill what the Constitution of the United States calls "to provide for the common defense, and insure domestic tranquility."

There is also the function mentioned in Verse 6: providing various services. Here the word that is used for "servants of God" is not the word *deacon*; it is *priest*, ministering *priests*. The idea here is that the government is not only to provide for our defense and security, but also to provide certain common services that we all need and to function as priests among us, helping us in our needs. Out of this grows the function of government in provid-

ing mail service, utilities (water, sewage), schools, relief agencies, and many other functions of government. Now these are all proper functions of government agencies.

In order to make these services possible, governments, by God's grace, have two powers given to them. This the Scriptures clearly teach:

- One, they have the power of using force. That is what is meant by "he bears not the sword for nothing." The sword is the symbol of the right to use force, even to the taking of life.

I don't think there is any area today in which people are more confused and muddled in their thinking than in this area of the use of force by the government, even to the point of capital punishment. Right now the state of California is debating this once more. Amazingly enough, the people of the state have declared with a loud voice that they want capital punishment, even though some of our leaders do not. I respect the conscience of these leaders, but I think the Scriptures indicate that there is a place for capital punishment. What people need to understand is that when the state, acting in line with the judicial system, functioning as it was intended to function, finally passes sentence on an individual to yield his life for a certain crime, then that is really not a man taking a man's life. God is taking that life by means of the state. That is what we need to understand. God has the right to take human life. All through the Old Testament you find him doing that very thing. He has also the right to set up human channels for doing this. This is what is meant here. This means that governments have the basic right to maintain armies for their defense, and that people – even Christians – are to serve in them.

I know I am touching on matters that are hotly debated, and I haven't time to fully defend these statements at this point, although I am glad to do so in private conversations or at other times. But governments have the right to maintain armies, police forces, to take life in capital punishment for certain crimes – all with the recognition that these powers can be abused and have been abused. There is no question about it. Citizens have every right to protest these abuses and to seek to correct them. But it is folly to try to eliminate the rightful uses of

authority because some of them are being abused. What we need to do is to correct the abuses and not eliminate the things Scripture ordains. I am not going into that any further, but much more can be said on this subject.

- The second power this passage says governments rightfully have from God to enable them to perform their function of protecting, securing, and providing various common services, is the power to collect taxes. Now you may not like the amount of taxes that your government collects, but you can't object to the principle of taxation. Taxes are right, and governments have taxed their citizens from time immemorial, and will continue to do so. The apostle makes clear that the government has the right to collect taxes, and Christians should pay them.

The final position of the Christian is summed up in Verses 5 and 7. In Verse 5 we see *the attitude* we are to have:

Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. {Rom 13:5 NIV}

This has to do with our attitude about taxes and arrests and judicial systems, etc. We are not to obey the law just because we are afraid we are going to get caught. We are not to keep to the speed limit just because there is a police car in sight. We are not to pay our incomes taxes just because we know the government now has tremendous computers that can review any number of records and might catch us. That is a factor, and many more people are honest about their taxes because of it, but that ought not to be the Christian's reason for being honest in paying his taxes. The Christian's reason is that it is the right thing to do before God. Your conscience ought to be clear. You ought to pay the taxes because that is what God says to do, and not what man says.

I am sure you heard of the man who wrote to the IRS and said, "A few years ago I cheated on my income taxes. My conscience has been troubling me, and I haven't been able to sleep. So I enclose a check for fifty dollars. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." No, conscience de-

mands that we keep the record clear for God's sake, and not for man's.

Then Verse 7 tells us what *actual actions* ought to follow:

Give everyone what you owe him; if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue [Revenue refers to those hidden taxes such as sales taxes, customs duties, etc.]; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. {Rom 13:7 NIV}

Here the apostle is dealing with our actual response to what these demands of government are. We haven't the right to withhold taxes if the government doesn't use them quite the way we think they should. Governments are made up of fallible men and women just like us, and we can't demand that the government always handle everything perfectly. Therefore what Paul wrote to these Romans, who had the same problems we have about taxes, was, "If you owe taxes, pay them." You know, I think the proof that God is behind all this is that this message comes the week before our income taxes are due and before property taxes are due. I didn't plan it that way, but that is the way it worked out. I don't get any refund on my income tax for preaching this kind of message either.

The point the apostle is making clearly is: **Don't resent these powers of government.** This is all set within the context of Paul's word in Chapter 12, "Be not conformed to this present age," {cf, Rom 12:2a}. Don't act like everybody else acts about taxes. The world grumbles and gripes and groans at paying taxes. You have a right, of course, as does everyone, to protest injustice and to correct abuse. There is no question about that. But don't forever be grumbling about the taxes that you have to pay.

I have had to learn some lessons on this myself. I remember the first time I had to pay an income tax, a few years ago. My income had been so low for a long time that I didn't have to pay any taxes. But gradually it caught up and I finally had to pay. I can remember how I resented it. I really did! In fact, when I sent my tax form in I addressed it to "The Infernal Revenue Service." They never answered, although they did accept the money. The next year, I had improved my attitude a bit. I addressed it to "The Eternal Revenue Service." But I

have repented from all those sins, and I now hope to pay my taxes cheerfully. The largest amount I have had to pay is due this year, but I want to send it off with thanksgiving to God for the government that we have – bad as it is in many ways.

I don't hold up any defense for the gross injustices that prevail in our American system. But the very fact that we can meet this morning and don't have to hide behind closed doors, the very fact that we have relative freedom from attack when we walk about is due to the existence of a government that God has brought into being. I want to make every effort I can, as a good citizen, to improve it and to see that it does things better. But I just thank God for the privilege of paying my taxes. This is what the apostle is after. He wants us to have a different attitude than the world around us about these matters. We are not to come on with gimlet-eyed fanaticism, attacking the government and seeking to overthrow it because it doesn't behave quite as we think it ought. But rather, we are to understand that God has brought it into being, and he will change it if the hearts of the people of the land warrant that.

Somebody has well said, "Every nation gets the government it deserves." And so as we pay our taxes, let us do so cheerfully. Remember that the apostle says not only that we are to pay our taxes, but if we owe respect, we are to give that; if honor, give that. Never forget that the worst of governments are, nevertheless, better than anarchy, and serve certain functions which God himself has ordained.

Therefore let us respond as Christians, with cheerfulness and gladness for what we can do under God, and let us do so in such an attitude that people will see that there is something different about us. Thus we commend ourselves to God and the people around.

Thus endeth the reading of the lesson: Pay your taxes.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for these practical words. How eminently practical they are in our lives, how deeply concerned you are even about such matters as this. Forgive us for ever thinking that you aren't concerned. Help us to be good citizens, Lord, but above all, to be faithful to our

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responsibility to show honor to those to whom honor is due, and respect to those who deserve it. Even though they may not personally be men and women deserving of

our respect, the office they hold demands it. Thus we pray that we may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. We ask in your name, Amen.

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