

Romans 13:1-2

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/rom/rom-13/romans-131-2/>

As Christians, we should obey the laws of our earthly government. The existing authorities were put there by God. If we break the law, we are defying God, and we're not exempt from punishment.

At this point in his letter to the Roman believers, Paul is explaining what righteous living by faith looks like. Part of righteous living is to obey the law of the land. Paul has been battling competing Jewish “authorities” who want believers to follow the Old Testament Law. Paul has soundly discredited the idea that after Christ we are still under the Law.

These competing Jewish “authorities” in Rome are probably battling with Priscilla and Aquila, who were fellow Jews who preached the gospel alongside Paul during an exile from Rome, and who have now returned to their home (Acts 18:2, 18, 26).

It is probable that, since Priscilla and Aquila lead a church in Rome (Romans 16:3-4), they have experienced pushback from the competing Jewish “authorities” there who oppose Paul’s ministry. Priscilla and Aquila likely sent word to Paul to ask for his help, resulting in this letter to the Roman churches.

Here in Chapter 13, however, in contrast to the Mosaic Law, Paul emphasizes the need to obey human laws and human governments. *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities* (v 1). Why? Because, according to Paul, *there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God* (v 1).

If living righteously (harmoniously) is accomplished by living by faith (as the theme verse of Romans says, in Romans 1:17), we must be obedient to God’s design: *Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God* (v 2).

If we disobey our government, we’re disobeying God, *and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves* (v 2). They will be punished for it. It is God’s will that we submit to authority.

In the United States, the ultimate authority for government is vested in the citizens, according to the US Constitution. That means God has appointed us as citizens to exercise authority properly, as service to Him and to others. That would mean that our job as citizens is to play our proper role in upholding a standard of loving our neighbors as ourselves, and insisting on a government that reflects biblical values for government. God’s direction for maximum human flourishing is in creating a self-governing society. The pillars of self-governance are 1) rule of law 2) consent of the governed and 3) private property.

We can see this structure throughout scripture, but particularly when God set up the nation of Israel. God established a legal covenant or treaty with Israel (rule of law). The primary guiding

principle of that covenant was for each person to love their neighbor as they love themselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-39).

God offered the treaty and the people entered into it voluntarily (Exodus 19:8). God directed the Israelites to choose judges for themselves, and directed them to choose judges that would be honest and judge without partiality (Deuteronomy 16:18-20). This establishes the principle of consent of the governed.

The third pillar of self-governance is private property. When Israel entered the land it was deeded to the families for them to possess. And a substantial portion of God's Law for Israel dealt with honoring the property and person of their neighbors (Exodus 20:13-17). The lowest bar for respecting and honoring other people (loving your neighbor) is to respect their property and person.

It is inferred that citizens of any republican form of government, like the United States, should advocate for these principles.

Of course with any rules or laws there is a hierarchy, with God at the top. We respect property but will break a window in a house to save someone from burning—life has a higher priority. In the same way, if government makes a law that violates moral conscience then it should be resisted. The apostles did this when they refused to obey an order to stop preaching the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18-20).

Paul wrote this admonition in Romans 13 to obey authorities but preached the gospel in spite of opposition from authorities (Acts 16:20, 25). And when the authorities misbehaved, Paul held them accountable under the law (Acts 16:37). All this falls from the principle Paul discusses in the next section, that God's purpose for delegating authority to government is for it to do good and deter evil.

Biblical Text

¹ Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.