

## THE CHRISTIAN IN SOCIETY

1. God has put all authority in place, so submit to authority
  - a. Obedience to law
  - b. Tax, respect, honour
2. Love is the greater law – all God's laws and most human laws sit under this
  - a. But not "fluffy love" or "passionate love" – true, Godly love!
3. Live today in the light of tomorrow

## BRIEF CONTEXT

Paul writing on submission to authorities:

- This is not written in naivety – he is ten years away from being martyred by the romans, but has still experienced:
  - Public beating and imprisonment without trial in Philippi
  - Thessalonican friend Jason put on bail without trial for associating with him
- He has also experienced authorities in Corinth and Ephesus correctly dismissing charges against him
- He has also experienced what it is like for "mob justice" to be done without authority present.

**Remember: this is how to live out lives of love, in the overflow of God's mercy and love.**

## SUBMIT TO AUTHORITY

Paul says that "there is no authority except that which God has established". Despite having been on the receiving end of oppression by the state, and despite knowing its idolatry and corruption, Paul writes that God has put authority in place for our good. He gives those rulers freedom to rule His way or not, but they are still His servants in their ruling. This makes sense of how he can say that "rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but only those that do wrong." The terror he's talking about isn't simply the punishment that might come from a ruler, but about the just condemnation when a ruler, acting as God's representative, justly enacts God's punishment on someone. In the one instance, we know that God is for us through injustice; in the other, we are under God's hand of judgment, enacted through His servant.

What does this mean?

- It means we need to obey the law – not just when we might get caught, and not just the big ones. If we disobey the law, we are disobeying the Lord.
- It means we need to participate fairly in taxation and civil duties. Not trying to avoid tax or jury service!
- Perhaps the toughest in our society – we need to honour and respect those in authority. What does this mean? What do we do when leaders display immoral behaviour, immature attitudes, or wilful blindness to fact?

Paul doesn't give any get-out clauses here. He doesn't even say explicitly what most of us probably believe, which is that we should obey the law of the land except where it conflicts with God's law – however, there are exceptions that are made clear elsewhere in Scripture. But Paul is clear, except where there are clear exceptions, our default must be obedience and honour.

What are the exceptions?

- Exceptions to obedience:
  - Direct disobedience to God's laws – Daniel / Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego (Daniel 3,6)
  - Opposition to the Gospel – Peter & John (Acts 5)
- Exceptions to civic duty:
  - Temple tax – but even then Jesus paid it "so as not to cause offence"
- Exceptions to honour and respect:

- Direct opposition to action – John the Baptist & Herod’s marriage to Herodias
- Where dishonour is the prophetic message (2 Kings 3:13-14 – Elisha, 2 Chron 18 - Micaiah)
- Refusal to be cowed by threats – Luke 13 (“Go tell that fox”)
- But note that none of these are mocking, talking behind their backs, or seeking to overthrow – note David and Saul at the cave of En Gedi.

“So what about Trump?”

- My checklist for Christian criticism of leaders
  - Is it motivated by love? (for God, for people, for the leader concerned)
  - Is it on the grounds of departure from God’s laws, rather than personal opinion?
  - Does it seek to convict (lead to repentance) rather than condemn (dismiss, belittle)?
  - Is it the most constructive way to bring challenge?
  - Is it brought in a setting where change is a possible outcome? (rather than griping / gossiping / mocking)
- However – that’s all very “responsive” – how to exercise restraint.
  - Note – strong Biblical principle of standing up for the oppressed, “the foreigner, the widow and the orphan”
  - The “whole counsel” of Scripture is not simply one of restraint, but also one of bringing truth
  - We should seek to have a voice to society
    - I’m pleased that conversations about personal debt and global debt are being championed by Christians (Cap, Community Money Advice, Jubilee 2000).
    - It saddens me that the Church has not been more at the forefront of redressing racial injustice.
    - I am glad that both the original abolition of slavery in 1800s and the current fight against trafficking have been spearheaded by Christians.
    - It saddens me that churches have often concealed sexual abuse, rather than seeking to eradicate it – although many in the church have also been on the front-foot in combating it.
    - It is good to see that the fair trade movement, which Christian aid agencies played an instrumental part in creating, is still championed by churches across the globe, including in Wheatley.
  - Worth watching “the two popes” for some interesting thoughts on this. See also Archbishop Lwum of Uganda, a modern martyr of the C of E for his opposition to Idi Amin’s excesses.

## THE GREATER LAW OF LOVE

We’re governed by a greater law than the law of the land. It’s the law of love, and it calls us to live out not only the explicit commands of God and the explicit commands of the law of the land, but also all those things not stated, but which are overflows of God’s love towards others.

- Ben & Michelle, who spoke to us a few weeks back, were visited by a local Imam. They’d been offering medical care to a local boy, essentially abandoned by his parents by being seconded to a local madrassa. The parents had no responsibility for him; nor did the Imam. The Imam’s question was: “this boy is a Muslim – why are you caring for him? Muslims should be doing that.” Ben’s comment – Islam legislates for situations, but it doesn’t change the heart.
- God’s law *does* get to the heart. Out of the overflow of God’s love, we should seek to live that love out towards others.
- This is part of being living sacrifices to God, being transformed rather than conforming. That suggests that there’s ongoing change in this regard – nobody should regard themselves as having got it all sorted!
- We live with one eye firmly fixed on the future coming of Christ – living so as to present Christ with a life well-lived.