

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE GOVERNMENT

Text: Roms 13:1-7

Readings: Mark 12:13-17; 1 Tim 2:1-7, 1 Peter 2:9-17

Belgic Confession Art 37

Theme: The government is appointed by God to maintain justice and to govern and Christians have a duty to submit to it and to pay taxes.

Every year on the 25th of April New Zealanders commemorate ANZAC Day. The acronym ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. On the 25th of April 1915 the Australian and NZ soldiers landed at Gallipoli in Turkey. This was the first major engagement for the ANZAC forces in WWI. The ANZAC soldiers were defeated by the Turks and suffered terrible losses. Nearly 3000 New Zealanders died and close to 8000 were wounded. On ANZAC Day we remember the soldiers who died, not only in that battle, but in all the wars NZ soldiers have fought.

One of the functions of the government is to protect the people of the country from harm and danger. That could be internal danger from murderers, rapists and robbers, or external danger from foreign armies seeking to invade our country. This is why the government maintains a police force to maintain internal order and an army, navy and air force to protect us from external danger.

In this service we want to consider the role and responsibility of the government and our duties and obligations as believers. We are going to look at two areas: first the **role of the government** and second the **role of the citizen**.

1. THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

This passage makes it clear that the governing authorities have been established by God. God has ordained certain structures and institutions in society. These are marriage, the family, the church and the government. "The authorities that exist have been established by God" (v 1b). In verse 4 Paul describes the state as "God's servant."

This is true of all government systems whether it be a monarchy - the rule by one person, an oligarchy - the rule of a few, an aristocracy – the rule of the nobility, or a democracy - the rule of the people. The *form* of government is not as important as the *function*. The *type* of government is not as important as what *it does*.

Paul explains that the state has *two main tasks*.

- a. The first is to **maintain justice**, to ensure that people are honest and truthful and law-abiding and to punish those who are not.
 - i. This is *necessary* because people are sinners by nature. If people were not sinful then it would not be necessary to maintain justice. But people need the restraint of the law and of the police to keep them in line. There have been some striking examples of lawlessness and looting that have broken out in cities when the police have gone on strike or when they have been absent from a situation.
 - ii. The government defines what is right or wrong by *making laws*. This establishes what is right or wrong, good or bad in the nation.

As Christians we know that the objective standard for what is right and wrong is defined by God's Word and his laws and commands. The Bible gives us a fixed standard for our lives, an unchanging code of conduct.

Unfortunately NZ, along with other western countries, no longer believes in God's Word and so has lost this objective standard. Decisions about laws are based on what the majority of the population believe is right or on what the majority of the members of parliament think is just and moral. This

means that moral decisions are based on sliding scale rather than having an objective and unchanging base.

This is why the government allows the murder of thousands on babies every year in abortion. This is why the government has undermined marriage and the responsibilities of husbands and wives, has promoted homosexuality, has legalised prostitution and has made smacking your child a criminal offence.

So the laws of the country are not always patterned on the laws of God. But the laws of the land define what is right and wrong in our society according to the state. This sometimes causes Christians much difficulty, which we will consider later on.

iii. It is the responsibility of the government to *enforce* these laws. Paul explains this in verse 2-4. Rulers have been given the power of the sword. If people do wrong then they will be punished. The one in authority is "an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." (vs 4).

Enforcing these laws means the state must appoint and maintain a police force, courts of law, appoint judges and maintain a prison system.

This then is the first task of the government - to maintain justice in society by enforcing the law and punishing those who break it.

b. The second task of the government is to **govern**, that is, to promote order and peace and harmony in society.

i. In verse 4 Paul says that the one in authority "is God's servant *to do you good.*" Bear in mind that when Paul wrote this the Roman Empire was in control of the known world. He wrote this about the Roman Caesar and governors.

In 1 Tim 2:2 we are urged to "Pray for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

The task of the government is to promote a stable and well ordered society, to protect life and property, to allow families and individuals to get on with their lives.

Under the reigns of David and Solomon the people of Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because their kings were wise and just.

Not all governments do so well; but a poor government is better than no government at all. The state is there to prevent internal unrest and conflict and trouble.

ii. And it is there to prevent *external* unrest and trouble. So part of their task is to protect the country against outside threats. On ANZAC Day we remember those who gave their lives protecting our country and our allies.

We all recognise the horror of war and want to avoid it if at all possible; but sometimes that is not possible and we have to go to war to defend our freedom and security as a nation. This why we need our armed forces and alliances with other nations.

These then are the two tasks of the state - to maintain justice and to promote order.

c. If there is ***too little* government** then you have anarchy and chaos - people do what they want and there is no order or stability in society.

But if there is ***too much* government** then we have a dictatorship - a totalitarian rule where people's lives are rigidly controlled by the state. Examples of this are Hitler's Germany, Stalin's USSR and communist China under Moa Tse Tung, as well as many of the Islamic countries today.

There is a tendency for governments to accumulate power, to extend their reach, to seek control more and more of what is going on. Over a period of years the NZ government has taken control of more and more areas.

For instance, education used to be responsibility of parents but now it is controlled by the government.

Or take the area of welfare: at one time people in need would be looked after by family members or by the churches or by voluntary organisations, but now the government has taken control of welfare.

When the government controls areas that are beyond its biblical mandate it is going to encounter problems. We see this in government welfare, which is run by a centralised bureaucracy and is often inefficient, ineffective and wasteful and tends to encourage a long-term dependency. The government is aware of these problems and is seeking to overcome them, but is not making much progress because it is operating out of a humanistic philosophy, not from a Christian worldview.

2. So what is OUR ROLE AS CITIZENS of this country? What are our duties and responsibilities?

a. Our first responsibility is to **submit** to the governing authorities (v 1). The word means to put ourselves under someone. We are to recognise that the government has been put here by God and we are to recognise its legitimate authority and submit to that.

Paul mentions that we should do all this from *two motives* (v 5): one is negative, "because of possible punishment"; the other is more positive, "also because of conscience"; we want to maintain a clear conscience before God in this matter.

Maybe there was something going on in the church in Rome that prompted Paul to emphasise this matter of submission. Christians in the first century tended to be lumped in with the Jews and the Jews were known to be difficult and disruptive citizens of the empire. In 49 AD Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome because they were disturbing the peace. There was also a fanatical Jewish terrorist group known as the Zealots who caused many problems for the Romans and were constantly urging rebellion.

Paul may have been concerned that the Christians, many of whom were Jews, would also rebel against the empire, and so he urged them to submit.

We need the same reminder and exhortation today, especially as the government moves further and further away from its God-given task.

We have to submit to the rulers of this nation and place ourselves under their authority. We have to pray for them. We must not take the law into our own hands and must not be rebellious.

b. In verse 7 Paul wrote about another obligation we have as Christian citizens; we are to give our rulers **respect and honour**.

We don't do that because they are always doing a great job (that is not always the case) nor because we elected them (we may have voted for the other party!) but rather because God has ordained them to rule over us.

This was also the message Peter wrote to believers scattered through the Roman Empire; he urged them to submit to the governing authorities so that "by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:13-15).

Christians should be the best citizens of this country, those who are most concerned for the peace and well being of the nation as we seek to serve God in the various callings in which he has placed us.

But, you might be thinking, how far do we take this? Do we have to submit to the government no matter what they do or say?! The short answer is, no. There are limits to the authority of worldly rulers. Jesus said we must give to Caesar's what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Mark 12:17).

Sometimes the state will ask us to do something that goes against the law of God and then we must obey God rather than man. There are biblical examples of such disobedience.

The midwives of Israel refused to obey the command of Pharaoh to throw the baby boys into the Nile (Ex 1:17).

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey the command of Nebuchadnezzar to bow down to his golden image (Dan 3).

Daniel refused to obey the command to only pray to King Darius (Dan 6).

And the apostles refused to obey the instruction of the Sanhedrin to stop preaching about Jesus (Acts 4:18ff).

Let's consider an illustration of these competing obligations.

Some of you have a dual citizenship - maybe a Dutch and a NZ passport. Most of the time, when everything is going smoothly, that is no problem. You can obey both. But in the unlikely event of a war between the Netherlands and NZ you would have to choose which side you will support. Which government will you submit to?

As Christians we have a dual citizenship; we are citizens of heaven and citizens of this country. Most of the time we can be both but sometimes we are forced to choose: whom will you serve; will you obey God or man? The biblical requirement is clear: we must obey God rather than man.

c. The final responsibility we have is to **pay taxes**.

We are to do this because our rulers give their full time to governing and so they need to be paid for that (v 6).

We also pay taxes because the national and local governments need money to provide a police force, an army, a judicial system and to manage the infrastructure of the country.

Verse 7: "If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue." The command is clear. We are to pay what we owe and not seek to evade legitimate taxes.

The government has a legitimate but limited role in society. It can and should restrain evil in society but it cannot provide a remedy for sin.

It can pass laws defining moral behaviour but it cannot produce that behaviour in its citizens.

The remedy for sin and evil does not lie in the government or in more laws but in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He can change people's hearts through his Spirit. He can turn people's lives around so they want to do what is good.

On ANZAC Day we remember how thousands of NZ soldiers have sacrificed their lives to maintain and protect the freedom we enjoy.

But Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice in laying down his life for his friends so that we might be freed from the punishment of sin in hell and free to live for God.

We keep praying and working for a just and ordered society so that we may live quiet and peaceful lives in all godliness and so we can continue to spread the good news about Jesus and his saving work.

Amen