



Should a Christian Submit to the State?

by Ronald L. Dart

Thank you, and good afternoon to everyone. I've been immersed, myself, in the past few weeks in the study of the Book of Romans. I've been in the process of attempting to get the third (and then preparation for the fourth) Bible study course lessons out. The third lesson will be "The Book of Romans: Part 1"; the fourth lesson, "Book of Romans: Part 2"—splitting the book because it is a comprehensive study into two separate sections; and consequently I have been, as I said, very involved in the book and research and study. And, of course, whatever tends to be very much on a preacher's mind is very likely what's going to come out when he begins to preach.

Last week, I gave a sermon entitled *Romans: The Heart of the Gospel* (which should be on the tape program hopefully very soon, as soon as we can get a good copy of the tape; we have a copy, Terry tells me he wants to see if he can talk to the person who got the original and get the original in order to have a good copy for the program); and in that sermon I discussed the background of the Book of Romans, the time of its writing, the political climate of the time, and noted the fact that it's probably the most comprehensive treatise on redemption that exists in the Bible—at least in any *one* place. Of course there's a great deal of information in the gospels, but it is the life of Christ, it's interwoven with so many different things, but it doesn't just set in order the gospel—the redemption of Jesus Christ. There are a couple of sermons of Paul's recorded in the Book of Acts, but they are so brief that it's a certainty that all Luke has given us is just an outline of it. And we are indebted to Paul for this because of a rather unusual circumstance—a simple circumstance, a deceptively simple thing: He had never been to Rome and, consequently, it was necessary for him, if he was going to convey a message to them, to be much thorough, much more definite in his explanations, much more comprehensive in his coverage than he would have been had he written to Corinth or Galatia—to those cities where he *had* been, where he *had* preached, and where he had laid out that gospel which he preached; and people who were quite familiar with it and had a background with which to read his letter.

The Roman Christians had no such background, and so Paul takes in hand to write a very elaborate exposition of the doctrine of redemption or the whole subject of redemption. And in it...of course, you can look at Romans, you can break it out in any number of different directions, but there are four major doctrines or concepts that are developed in the Book of Romans. The first one he develops is the doctrine of sin—the idea that without the conviction of sin there is no salvation, because it is the starting point. The doctrine of justification follows close on the heels of that, pointing out the necessity for Christ's death to pay the penalty for our sins; and it is his shed blood that removes our guilt, that the waters of baptism symbolize Christ's death and resurrection, to walk in newness of life; and he proceeds quickly to explain to us we are saved by Christ's life, and begins to develop the doctrine of salvation. The fourth major doctrine that he develops in the Book of Romans is called by some the "doctrine of duty", which means that alongside of this free salvation that is offered to Christians—it is a total matter of grace—there is an inexorable responsibility that also descends upon our shoulders by virtue of the fact that we are Christians. And Paul in this epistle develops a concept of duty toward God, duty to the church, duty toward weak brethren—which we are all very familiar with in Romans, the 14th chapter, where he says:

Romans 14

AKJV

¹ Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations.

Where he talks about:

Romans 15

AKJV

¹ We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak[....]

And he also develops a concept of duty even to civil government. The 13th chapter of Romans is fairly familiar to most of us, and today I want us to take a look at this particular concept; because it's very important and, I think in order to understand it, in order to really grasp what it is that Paul is saying, we need to understand somewhat about the historical background in which these words were written. First of all, if you'll turn to Romans 13, I want to just read the first seven verses of this chapter without comment.

Romans 13

KJ2000

¹ Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

² Whoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Will you then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same:

⁴ For he is the minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bears not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath on him that does evil.

⁵ Therefore you must be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience's sake.

⁶ For, for this cause pay you tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

⁷ Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Now, that is a *fascinating* scripture just taken in the 20th-century context; and beginning to ponder within yourself: What does that mean? What obligations does this lay upon me? What is my relationship to the civil government in *our* time?

Before I even talk about that, I'd like to take us back to the time when Paul wrote this. The year by most people's reckoning is AD 58. Nero is 20 years old, and it's probably in about the fifth year of his reign as Emperor (or Imperator) of Rome. It is a fascinating time, a dangerous time it would seem, in many ways to live; and I think few people have more than a peripheral idea of the *incredible corruption* that existed in the highest echelons of Roman civilization, of Roman government. I think most of us are vaguely aware of the poisonings, of the murders, of the various adulterous relationships that got going in that time. Actually, murder and incest seem to be two of the most common and most severe of the sins that were committed at the highest levels—by emperors, by Claudius, by Caligula, and finally by Nero himself. (Although in the earliest part of his reign—when he was 16, 17, and 18 years old—there wasn't that much of that type of thing to be seen in his reign. But nevertheless, it was commonplace.) Human life was *really dirt cheap*.

Homosexuality, absolutely rampant in government and especially, though, among the elite of the population. So common, in fact, were some of these sins (like fornication) that they really were of very little import; it was expected of men that they have a mistress. So much that went on was “normal”.

It is difficult from our point of view, as I said, to really comprehend the bloody nature—the absolute incredible cheapness of human life—that existed at this time. But most of those murders, really, were people who were killed because they posed some sort of threat to power. Nero’s mother, for example (Agrippina) was constantly, once she began to sense that Nero was getting out of her control, *intriguing* in some way or another to try to maneuver power in the nation, to shift power; and there even became a question as to whether she might not try to create some alliance with someone else that would unseat *her own son* as emperor. And Nero, in consequence, had his own mother murdered— not that far before this scripture that we read today was written. This is the leadership of Rome—a man who, without a great deal of evidence one way or the other, or for whatever reasons, would actually have his admiral, the chief of his navy, arrange to have deliberately his mother’s boat scuttled going across the bay from his house to hers in the hopes that she would drown. She didn’t. She swam to shore onto his fishing boat, got home, and then he had to send a guy after her with a knife and swords to finally hack her to pieces in her own bedroom, back at her own villa. His own mother. These were the times.

However, to the man in the street, to the person who was minding his own business, it was a relatively calm time; because *Pax Romana* reigned in most parts of the world, it was possible for Paul and others to travel freely without fear of bandits because of the presence of Roman legions, of Roman soldiers, of those who enforced the law with such vigilance and such *immediate justice*, that at least the common man was relatively safe if he minded his own business. For Christians and other religious sects, there was general tolerance as long as they posed no threat to the government or to anybody else. Corinth, under Roman domination, was one of the most incredible hotbeds of weird religion that anyone could ever comprehend in their life. It would even make Los Angeles look pale by comparison, and it was tolerated. Why persecute the Christians when there are *all manner* of religions, if one chose to persecute them, that one might go after in this day and time?

It has always been hard for me to understand, looking back in history and reading of Nero’s persecution and the subsequent ones that took place in Rome, difficult to really grasp *why* it was that a church, or a group of people, who espoused the teachings of a simple carpenter of Nazareth—the teachings of peace, of love toward neighbor, of love toward God, of filial duty, of duty to the state, of all the responsibilities. . . It’s always been difficult to understand how it could possibly be that the church that followed Jesus Christ would find itself in such bad odor with the *civil* authority. Now, with *religious* authority, one could understand that; because they posed a *definite* threat to the authority of most synagogue structures. The chief rabbi, or the chief leader of the local synagogue was very likely to lose, not only members, but financial support when the church, Paul, or the others came through. And, true to form, as Paul went from place to place, he was suffered persecution. But it wasn’t *Roman* persecution; it was persecution from *the Jews* of the time, to whom he posed a threat. The earliest Christian church—the one that we see in the early chapters of the Book of Acts—*posed no civil threat* to the Roman government, and there was absolutely no reason why they should have had difficulties with them in any way.

However, there probably were *sects* in Christianity in existence by this time already. We do not know, for example, of the subsequent history of Simon Magus after Acts, the eighth chapter. We do not know for sure where he is. We do not know what he has done. We do not know what manner of following he may have. We are not even sure that he was alive (although there’s a great deal of speculation that he went on to Rome, and that he may have been the founder of what we today look back on as the great Roman church). And, of course, knowing his character as exhibited in the eighth chapter of Acts, you would *expect* the man to continue to develop a following, to try to maintain control over people’s lives, because that was his very make-up—his very being. What happened to him? What had happened, by this time, to one Cerinthus over in the western part of Asia Minor, who had a sort of strange combination of Judaism and Christianity he had formed into a religion? *That* we don’t know; and to

what extent some of these Christians sects—that might have even existed by AD 50—may have begun to pose a threat in the Roman Empire...well, by this time no one could possibly know. One of the things that is speculated about in this whole thing is that there may very well have been some trouble raised for the church because of their close association with the Jews. If you turn back to Acts, the 18th chapter, there is a reference to an event that took place that I think is significant. Acts 18, verse 1:

Acts 18

AKJV

¹ After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth;

² And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came to them.

Now, this took place about AD 53—about five years before the time that Paul wrote this epistle. And because the New Testament church was very closely associated with the Jews, there could be very little doubt that probably a lot of Christians who may not have even *been* Jews were forced to leave Rome at the same time the Jews were forced out of Rome. Suetonius tells us:

He expelled the Jews from Rome, as they were making continual insurrections, under their leader Chrestus.

Suetonius - The Lives of the Twelve Caesars

Now, some have thought this “Chrestus” might be a reference to “Christus” (or to Christ) and that the reason why...that it was Christians, actually, that were being expelled from Rome; but this is too early for any body of Christians to have been that much of a factor in the city of Rome. Remember, Paul in writing in the very first chapter of this book, *five years* after all the Jews had been expelled from Rome (of course, there could have been Christians prior to that time)...but looking back on it, he’s writing and saying there is no established church in Rome. And there is no indication in the Book of Acts of an established church *prior* to this time. The chances are, as far as the *numbers* of Christians that existed in Rome...how many could there have been? Because from *all over* the Roman Empire on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, we baptized...what? Just a few thousand people [Acts 2:41]. And these people, of course, would have returned all over the Roman Empire—and a few of them, no doubt, to Rome—but those who were Jews, again, were forced out just five years previous to this letter being written. One wonders, of course, just what was going on at this time. Adam Clarke in his commentary on Acts, really says that he does not believe that you could support the idea that it was Christians who were expelled as Jews following Chrestus, but rather just simply Jews that followed this particular approach of life, of one Chrestus, that got thrown out of there. It’s of passing interest, as a matter of fact, that Clarke points out that in these “early times, the Christians were generally confounded with the Jews” by most people. In other words, they would look at a group of Christians, they’d look at a group of Jews, and they’d wonder, “What is the difference?”

I always thought that was fascinating, and especially when I came to it this time and read it again, saying: What a minute, here’s a man looking back to the first century and tells us that the early Christian church was virtually indistinguishable to somebody who didn’t know from the Jews; and therefore might very well have suffered because of the persecution that was going on at that the time. The reason is simple, of course: They had common customs and common practices. The Christian church at that time was keeping the Sabbath. The Christian church at that time were keeping the Holy Days—the same ones of the Jews. Conybeare and Hawson point out that even the church of Corinth was keeping the Days of Unleavened Bread, even to the point of putting leavening out of their homes

during this period of time. And so we find good reason why the Christians were not that distinguishable from the Jews.

At the time of writing, the Jews had long since returned to Rome, and Clarke makes an interesting observation about them. This is in his *Commentary on Romans*:

That the Jews were in general an uneasy and seditious people is clear enough from every part of their own history. They had the most rooted aversion to the heathen government; and it was a maxim with them that the *world was given to the Israelites*; that they should have supreme rule every where, and that the Gentiles should be their vassals. With such political notions, grounded on their native restlessness, it is no wonder if in several instances they gave cause of suspicion to the Roman government, who would be glad of an opportunity to expel from the city persons whom they considered dangerous to its peace and security; nor is it unreasonable on this account to suppose [...] that the Christians, under a notion of being the *peculiar people of God*, and the subjects of his kingdom alone, might be in danger of being infected with those unruly and rebellious sentiments: therefore the apostle shows them that they were, notwithstanding their honors and privileges as Christians, bound by the strongest obligations of conscience to be subject to the civil government.

Adam Clarke - Commentary on Romans

This is all very interesting to me as I read through this, and as I read through a book called *Nero* by Arthur Weigall, which is a very thorough biography of Nero, I began to realize that when Paul came along in this epistle there was no special reason for him, as he had developed...especially in the context of Romans 12, which is one of the most *beautiful* exhortations to humility and service and duty to your fellow Christians and your fellow man that's ever been penned by the hand of man...to suddenly shift his ground in the way he does to this question of responsibility to *civil authority*. And I asked myself: *Why* did he say this?

Clarke points out the history of the Jewish people, and it requires no anti-Semitism to agree with him and to realize that they have *always* been an uneasy people; they have *always* been a turbulent people. They have fought, battled with Rome, and of course one of the *great* stories of all time is the story of their great holdout against the Roman armies on that hilltop [the fortress Masada] when so many of them committed suicide rather than give in to the Roman hordes that were around the base of that mountain. Their whole approach, if it were followed in any way by the Christian church in the Roman Empire, could be a matter of grave concern to the apostle Paul. Now, I would suspect—since he knew a little bit about the church at Rome—that he was aware of a certain amount of rumbling, a certain amount of uneasiness, certain things that might have been being said, certain actions being taken by the church or by Christians, that he felt might endanger the safety of all of them. And so he stops and he addresses the problem right here in this book. Going back now to Romans, the 13th chapter, I'd like to take just a moment to look at some of the details that we just passed over before in reading through the epistle. Beginning in verse one:

Romans 13

AKJV

¹ Let every soul [...]

And the commentators generally agree with this: that the expression “every soul” is drawn out to say he's not just talking to one category of people or another category of people or just to a particular situation. He is not dealing with only the expediency of things in Rome, saying, “Now, because of the

present distress, because of the troubles that you face in Rome, I would like for *those of you in Rome* to particularly be careful to be subject to the higher powers.” The way this is worded is saying:

Romans 13

AKJV

¹ Let every soul be subject to the higher powers [authorities].

The word in the Greek (*exousia* [ἐξουσία, Strong’s G1849]) basically means “authority”, as opposed to *dunamis* [δύναμις, Strong’s G1411], which means “power” in the sense of physical force. He’s talking about those who sit in positions of authority. Nor is he in any way talking about *religious* authority, as will be seen later on when he talks about taxation, custom, duty. (And “custom”, the term even in the Greek [τέλος, Strong’s G5056], seems to mean the idea of paying duty on import and export goods that are brought in and out through custom houses in a nation.

Romans 13

AKJV

¹ Let every soul be subject to the higher [authorities]. For there is no [authority] but of God: the [authorities] that be are ordained of God.

We get our expression “the powers that be”, all the way down to the English language today, comes from the King James’ expression we find right here, I expect. The powers that be, the authorities, the civil leaders in a community—they are *ordained of God*.

Romans 13

AKJV

² Whoever therefore resists the power [or, the authority], resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

Now, those are *very* strong words. I don’t know any way that Paul could have written to these Roman Christians and expressed it any stronger. And it is absolutely *astounding* that this should be written in this way to Christians in *Rome* of all places, where the government from top to bottom was one of the most corrupt, dangerous, and violent that has ever existed—where human life was so cheap. To what, respect *that* government? *That* government was ordained of God? Because, you see, the highest civil authority in that city when he penned these words was Nero—*Nero*—one of the most hated, despicable figures in all of history, was *the* authority in Rome. *His* word and you’re dead. All he would have to say to most citizens of Rome was, “Go and commit suicide.” This was done repeatedly under Caligula, Claudius, the others. They would say, “I’m finished with you. You should go and take your life.” And the traditional means of doing it was to open the veins of the wrist, go into your steam bath (which many of them had in their own home), and sit there and quietly bleed to death. It was the way it was done. And if you should demur from that, the chances are you’d be hacked into pieces by a group of Roman soldiers. It was, perhaps, some people thought a little more comfortable to do it the other way than that they have your life taken violently, which would certainly ensue immediately after such an imperial edict just came their way. It is really sobering, as I said, to reflect on this.

Now, is this just Paul’s idea? Is this just a temporary thing—a temporal thing, having to do only with this time and this place? I think it’s worth just examining it a little further. If you’ll turn back to the 19th chapter of John. John 19, and beginning about verse 9:

John 19

AKJV

⁹ And went again into the judgment hall, and said to Jesus, From where are you? But Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰ Then said Pilate to him, Speak you not to me? know you not that I have power to crucify you, and have power to release you?

“It is in my hands. I can speak the word and you’re a free man. *I can speak the word and you’re dead.* What do you mean? Aren’t you going to say something to me? I can save your life!”

John 19

AKJV

¹¹ Jesus answered, You could have no power at all against me, except it were given you from above: [...]

That’s a powerful statement. Here is the man who was about to take the life of the very Son of God, whose power that he held was from above. Now, I don’t know if I...in fact, I am quite *sure* that I do not fully understand how that can be, but the *words* of Jesus are incapable of any other explanation. They are clear enough. They say categorically the power that Pilate held, the authority that he exercised, came from above. And he said, “You would *have* no authority except for that.” And he said,

John 19

AKJV

¹¹ [...] therefore [*because that authority is from above*] he that delivered me to you has the greater sin [*on their shoulders having delivered me into your authority in this way*].

It’s a fascinating concept. Turn back to First Peter, because there is also there an important statement made in this same regard. First Peter, chapter 2. He says in verse 13:

1 Peter 2

AKJV

¹³ Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake[....]

Now, I don’t know how you could be more comprehensive than that. If you will notice, Peter does not even say, “...unless it is in contradiction to the Law of God.” Now clearly, if there were some ordinance of man that came in direct conflict with the Law of God (you know, God says you shall keep the Sabbath; man’s law says you shall work on the Sabbath), obviously you’re going to put God’s Law ahead of man’s law. But Peter doesn’t even mention that. He assumes that you know that, and with whatever exclusions apart from that he says, “every ordinance of man”.

Now, a lot of gentle Christians over the years have felt that it is a violation, really, of God’s Law in this sense (or an indirect violation of God’s Law) to exceed the speed limits because they are the “ordinances of man”. And, of course, as it has been pointed out (and it’s easy enough to understand), if it were *not* for the ordinances of man—and human governments and civil ordinances and laws—any type of society would be absolutely impossible. For order to exist, for us not to collide with one another at street corners, there’s stop signs and a system of right-of-ways is established, and we have lights that we all obey...religiously. (At least we *hope* we do.) And maybe “religiously” is a good word for it, because here these gentlemen seem to be saying to us—Paul, and then Peter, and, of course, Christ himself supports it—that as a matter of fact the power and the authority that is given to the ordinances of man comes from somewhere else. He says “submit yourself to every ordinance of man *for the Lord’s sake*”, which in itself is very interesting.

1 Peter 2

AKJV

¹⁴ Or to governors, as to them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the

praise of them that do well.

¹⁵ For so is the will of God, that with well doing you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men:

¹⁶ As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.

¹⁷ Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

Now, these are all easy enough to follow. In Peter's letter you get another interesting insight into this. He speaks of "put[ting] to silence the talk of foolish men". He is trying to tell them that the church has been spoken against by people who do not understand our doctrines; because of things that church members did that they may not have *had to do*; because the things that they *said* that they didn't *have to say*; because of attitudes that they may have adopted toward their community, toward their neighbors, toward people around them, that they *didn't have to adopt*; things were being said about the church by foolish men that shouldn't have been said. And he said, "The only way we can put to rest this conversation is for you to be subject to *every ordinance of man. All of them!*" In other words, it's a plea on Peter's part to the Christians of his day, to the old equivalent of what the modern thing would be: of just civil responsibility, of *good citizenship*. That's what he's asking them to do. "Be subject to the laws, obey the authorities, live at peace in this world. You don't know exactly what may be coming." In fact, Peter's letter was written a little later and has overtones that are very sobering, indeed, which I'll come to in a few moments. Going back now, if you would, to Romans the 13th chapter again:

Romans 13

KJ2000

¹ Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

² Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves judgment.

In other words, you resist that authority and they're going to drag you into judgment, and you're going to pay. Jesus said something very similar, didn't he?

Matthew 5

AKJV

²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, whiles you are in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and you be cast into prison.

²⁶ Truly I say to you, You shall by no means come out there, till you have paid the uttermost farthing.

Saying that if you find yourself in conflict...and, I think, in a careful study of Christ's teaching, that he is talking also in the Sermon on the Mount about that civil authority—that government that was over Judea at the time, the Roman government, where a soldier might grab you by the collar and say, "You're going to walk with me a mile", and give you a mail sack to carry along with him. And you had to go that mile. He says, "If he compels you to go that mile, go *two*, go another one. If that man slaps you on the cheek, my advice to you is to turn the other one also; because if you don't, you could be a dead man in the next instant" [vv. 41, 39]. It's important to understand the context in which some of these things were said. It was a dangerous times in some ways. If you minded your own business, if you were a good citizen, if you were obedient, things wouldn't necessarily be all that bad for you. But if you were a rebel, if you were stubborn, if you were determined to have your own way, if you're going to *fight* the government, if you're going to *bad mouth* the government, if you're going to stand around on the street corners and call this city we're living in "Babylon the Great, dirty rotten place, I wish it

would burn down!”...which *some* Christians probably did—standing in some wine-house in the city of Rome, somewhere long about this time—which, as long as things didn’t go too badly, it might have been a safe enough thing to say. But as history later proved, it was a *dangerous* thing for them to do. He says:

Romans 13

AKJV

³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, [...]

And you know it is true? For the most part, in the history of God’s people—Old Testament and New Testament—there was rarely ever persecution of *good* people by the civil authority. Most of the time (and this is especially true in Paul’s ministry) the persecution that he endured came entirely from *religious* people. And, if you’ll recall Jesus’ statement; he said:

John 16

AKJV

² [...Y]es, the time comes, that whoever kills you will think that he does [...]

...the state a service? Oh, no. He...

John 16

AKJV

² [...] will think that he does God a service.

And so, again, the problems Christians were prophesied to have would be with *religious* people. Not with the state. Paul says the same thing; he says, “There’s no reason to worry about rulers. They are not a terror to good works.” What government—what civil government, trying to maintain any kind of continuity, any type of order in a community—is going to *object* to people who won’t steal, who tell the truth, and who honor their father and their mother, people who are not covetous of what belongs to their neighbor. There is nobody nicer to live next door and to have in a community than a *good Christian*, a good God-fearing Christian. The only time Christians were a problem is when they became a threat. Paul’s question is: “Why, brethren, should we be a threat to anyone except some fool preaching false doctrine.” No one, no reason. They are not a terror to good works, but they sure can scare the evil ones.

Romans 13

AKJV

³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Will you then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same:

And it is fascinating that in the earliest years of the church it said that the church grew in favor with God and man. Everybody around them was pleased and impressed with the things that they were doing. Then it goes on to say, talking about this ruler:

Romans 13

AKJV

⁴ For he is the minister of God to you for good. [...]

Now, I know it must have been hard for a Christian living in the streets of Rome, if he happened to be there during the days of Claudius (prior to Nero), to realize that this man who had put so many people to death he lost track of who they were...He had actually caused the death, I think, in his reign of 35

Romans senators and around 300 Roman gentlemen. And it was such a light thing to him that he was known on occasion...oh a week or two or three after he had had some man put to death, to send for him. He'd forgotten he was dead! He'd forgotten he was dead. He said, "Go get Senator so-and-so", and somebody had to remind him, "Look, you had him killed three weeks ago." He was that kind of man. And this word is true; he said, "This man is a minister *to you* for good." (What, of course, many people don't seem to realize is that those senators were suspected of sedition, and probably at least half of them were guilty. Many of those Roman gentlemen, because of the kind of person Claudius was, would very much like to have seen that old man put off down in Egypt, or on an island, or somewhere else where he couldn't bother anybody anymore; because he was a lot of trouble to everybody around.)

So, Paul wrote to people living under Nero; and he says that higher power—Nero, Narcissus (one of his freedmen that lived in his own household), Pallas (who came along later, who was one of the people who helped to administer to Rome)—these men, he said, are "ministers of God to you for good." Why? Well, because they keep the robbers off your back. They keep crime down in the street. Because one thing is for sure: If they punished people for sedition and for treason in those days, they also punished them for robbery and for murder. (Unless you happened to be the emperor, and then you'd get away with murder. But the man in the street couldn't get away with murder.) And, as a consequence, the man in the street was safer in many ways than the man in the senate during this period of time.

Romans 13

AKJV

⁴ For he is the minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bears not the sword in vain: [...]

Implication? He has the power of capital punishment in his hand; that's the symbolism of the sword. He's not talking about the church. He's not talking about authority, or dominion, or rulership *in the church*. He is talking about the civil government with capital punishment at his hand. He says, "If you do what's evil, be afraid; but it's better, frankly, for you not to do that."

Romans 13

AKJV

⁴ [...] for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath on him that does evil.

In other words, God uses the civil government to *punish* wrongdoers on the face of this earth.

Romans 13

KJ2000

⁵ Therefore you must be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience's sake.

"In order that your mind be clear." And I imagine that if you've ever contemplated income tax evasion (or if you've ever *practiced* income tax evasion), and then begun to wonder at some later time whether or not the feds are going to be looking at your bank account, or audit and follow something through, and lain awake in the middle of the night wondering what's going to happen, you'll understand what Paul means when he says, "You'd better not only obey because of wrath, but you'd better also obey for conscience's sake—so you *can* have a clean conscience."

Romans 13

AKJV

⁶ For for this cause pay you tribute also: [...]

The taxes, the normal due that had to be done in a society. He said, “You cough up your taxes.” Somebody raised a question some years ago, saying, “Well, should we be paying income taxes since *so much* of our income taxes go to support a standing army which is designed to kill, and go out and conquer, and so forth?” If *we* had that argument, believe me, the Christians in Rome had it in spades; because they also were supporting a standing army. But on the other hand, that standing army kept the barbarians out of Rome, it kept them safe. Those police that were supported by those taxes in Rome kept them safe in their homes and in their quarters at night. There were laws, they were enforced, they were followed, and they were supported by a system of taxation which was, at times, pretty oppressive. But Paul just says, “Pay your taxes.” A bunch of guys came to Jesus one time, and they were hoping to trap him and trying to find some cause against him, and they said, “Now, tell me this, Master”...

Matthew 22

AKJV

¹⁷ [...] Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?

¹⁸ But Jesus [...] said, [...]

¹⁹ Show me the tribute money. And they brought to him a penny.

²⁰ And he said to them, Whose is this image and superscription?

²¹ They say to him, Caesar's. Then said he to them, Render therefore to Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's

This isn't some new idea that Paul's got. Jesus taught the same thing: that a person who is a Christian *should pay his taxes*. And he goes on to say:

Romans 13

AKJV

⁶ [...] for they are God's ministers, attending continually on this very thing.

The tax collector is *God's* minister? It's hard to swallow in a way, but it's what the man says.

Romans 13

AKJV

⁷ Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; [...]

(And by that they seem to be talking about the same thing we mean by customs duties today.)

Romans 13

AKJV

⁷ [...] fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Render it to whomever; honor the king. You know, as I said earlier, some gentle Christians have felt, with some justification, that this even includes traffic laws. And I remember it even being discussed in the Ambassador Club back in 1958 by some students who had a table topics(?) one night, and they quoted this scripture, and they said, “Does this mean that we're violating the Law of God if we exceed the speed limit?” And we had a rather interesting discussion on that whole question. It is a matter of some interest. It's a matter of some concern. In other words, there's some justification in people asking that question. No, you're not exactly crossing...or *breaking* the Law of God, but you are breaking an ordinance of man which exists by the permission of God under his commission, as it were, to human beings to maintain order on the face of this earth. And, if you live in a society, Paul says be subject to the laws of that society. And by that I'm sure Paul, if he were living today, would say, “Keep the speed

limit! We are good citizens and we should be cooperating with the society and trying to save energy and save lives. Stop at the stop signs! Obey the traffic laws! Because if you're hailed into court, you'd better be ready to pay the penalty. It's not going to do you any good to violate the laws of man, and get called into court, and to pray to God to get you off without paying any penalty. *You knew the law, you broke it, you knew this scripture.* Christ said you're not going to come out until you have paid the uttermost farthing."

I don't believe I've ever prayed to ask God to have me not have to pay a traffic fine. Haven't had many, but I *have* had a few. But I just know there's no point in it. You're going to pay that last farthing of that traffic fine; because, after all, you were told a long time ago. On customs, some gentle Christians have felt that whenever you come through customs from overseas you should declare everything you brought just like the law says you ought to do it. Some simple, gentle Christians believe that you really *ought not to lie* to custom officials when they say, "Did you buy anything overseas?", and say, "Oh, I bought this bottle of wine, and I bought this bottle of whiskey" (all of which is within dutiable allowance). And if they just don't ask you, "Did you buy anything else?", you don't have to tell them about the diamond-studded wristwatch that you bought. Is that honest? Is that following the laws of man? No, it's not. And he says, "Render tribute to whom tribute, custom to whom custom." There are some gentle Christians who feel that it's wrong to bring goods into this country without declaring them, much less to lie and to smuggle.

Regarding taxes, some gentle Christian have another strange attitude toward them. You know, the state of Texas (as well as other states in the Union), have a rather elaborate set of laws regulating corporations—corporate structures. There are a lot of things common to all state laws regarding corporations, I expect, but each state has its own variations on that theme of one sort or another. The idea being that people have to band together to do things, and you've got to have laws that treat the corporation as a body in law so that somebody can be culpable and responsible and that you know where to go and what the organization is doing. And these corporations are subject to taxation. A corporation that owns business property in Tyler will pay city tax. They'll probably pay something to Tyler Junior College. They'll have all sorts... They have school taxes; I expect they do. Many of the people who have oil wells around here pay different kinds of taxes which helps support our school system. All of which goes to create in East Texas here a rather nice society, doesn't it? A good civilization. A good place to live. A place to feel secure, to have your children in good schools, and all of these things. Now, there are some Christians who believe you should be good citizens, and that you should pay your taxes; but the state does recognize that occasionally there are corporate bodies that are put together for purposes that are really beneficial to the public as a whole, and they have set aside laws regulating non-profit corporations. And sometimes these non-profit corporations are immune in various ways and in various degrees from taxes in the states of the Union and from federal taxes in some ways. And individuals who contribute to these corporations can take those deductions off of their income tax with the federal government.

Now, all these laws are on the books in the states. They are pretty involved, but a good attorney can sit down and explain to you what your responsibilities are at whatever time you wish to file as a non-profit corporation. Any of us could do it. Three of us could get together, we could fill out some papers, we can sign them, get a lawyer, file them down in Austin and, bang, we are a non-profit corporation. And it gets us all kinds of tax breaks; which is to some extent at the expense of our fellow citizens, isn't it? If we are to own property in our non-profit corporation, and we *don't* pay taxes on it, then our neighbors who *do* pay taxes are helping to subsidize us to some degree.

Now, we would hope that that same lawyer that you and I go to when we get our non-profit corporation put together, will also explain to us that part of the law which spells out *our responsibilities to our fellow citizens*, wouldn't we? We would assume that since the law...we're taking advantage of the law; the law says you can do *this*, you don't have to pay taxes *here*, we'll give you *this* break over here and *this* opportunity here. Man, that's marvelous. And we would assume if we were to reach out and *take* that, that we must also at the same time grasp the responsibility that goes with it. That's fair enough. If

we didn't want to do that, if we don't want that responsibility, we do not have to incorporate in that way. We can incorporate as a normal, tax-paying corporation; not a non-profit corporation, no Internal Revenue Service Number, no nothing. We operate just like anybody else does. And then the responsibilities that descend upon non-profit corporations we do not have to meet. And so, I think, as I say, that there are some gentle Christians who really believe that we should not accept the tax breaks that come to us in the state of Texas without accepting the responsibilities. I don't know, frankly, if I have a full grip on all of the responsibilities that fall upon us in the State of Texas because we're a non-profit corporation here. But I will say this: They've been on the books longer than I've been living in Texas, probably; and I have *no excuse* if later on a State of Texas representative shows up on the doorstep, or shows up at one of our board meetings, and says "Gentlemen, I hate to tell you this, but there is an area that you've been violating of the Texas Code regarding non-profit corporations and we're here to talk it over with you." I can't very well say to that man, "King's X", you know, or "I didn't know any better", or "Hold on, I was ignorant of the law." He's going to say, "Well, I'm sorry fella, you weren't ignorant of that part of the law that you filed under as a non-profit corporation."

Paul says: Pay your taxes, pay your customs, pay your dues; and if you *do* take your exemptions from taxes, take your responsibility and be subject to the civil government! It is the minister of God! Oh, that we could all get that through our heads, that we could grasp that, that we could believe what it means. Well, I think it is very important that we, down here in Tyler, Texas, and doing the things that we are doing, *recognize* what we are doing when we claim any kind of exemption from paying tribute in our society. We are doing so within the laws of the state and, consequently, we are *bound* unto those laws of the state.

Now, I have no doubt that the question back in those days arose as to: What if this civil government really is corrupt? Now, Adam Clarke, in his commentary on Romans, has some interesting things to say about this scripture, vis-à-vis, corrupt government. I thought I would just read some of it to you because, I think at least, even though you may not entirely agree with all of Clarke's conclusions, I think you'll find them at least interesting. He says:

But it has been asked, if the ruler be an immoral or profligate man, [...]

Adam Clarke - Commentary on Romans

And, of course, this was a very important thing in Paul's day when he wrote this, because the ruler was Nero.

[...] does he not prove himself, thereby, to be unworthy of his high office, and should he not be deposed? I answer—No: if he rule according to the *constitution*, nothing can justify rebellion against his authority. He may be *irregular* in his *own private life*; he may be an immoral man, and disgrace himself by an improper conduct: but if he rule *according to the law*; if he make no attempt to change the constitution, nor break the compact between him and the people; there is, therefore, no legal ground of opposition to his civil authority: and every act against him is not only rebellion, in the worst sense of the word, but is unlawful, and absolutely sinful.

Adam Clarke - Commentary on Romans

Now, that is really profound when you think of it in terms of Nero and the Roman government and what Paul was saying. And I think what he is saying is consistent with what Paul was trying to say. It is *true* that this man is corrupt in his private life, but the fact of the matter was that the five years leading up to the time Paul had written this were *five of the best years in the history of Roman government*, as

far as administration according to law was concerned. The Roman law allowed some things to take place which were pretty horrendous; but Nero, as were emperors before him, as were the senators, was concerned about Roman law; because certain riots got going at one time or another over some things that emperors did, from the people, from the masses. And while you can kill a senator who is plotting rebellion, or some guy over here that might be a lawful heir as well to old Augustus Caesar, you can't kill the whole masses of the people if they rise up. And apparently the Romans were just that type of people. So the emperors *were concerned*, believe it or not, about the law. Though they did some abominable things, they still had concern, at least for appearance, as to whether they were within the law. He goes on, Clarke does, to say:

Nothing can justify the opposition of the subjects to the ruler, but *overt attempts*, on his part, to *change the constitution*, or to rule *contrary to law*.

Adam Clarke - Commentary on Romans

Listen again:

Nothing can justify the opposition of the subjects to the ruler, but *overt attempts*, on his part, to *change the constitution*, or to rule *contrary to law*. When the ruler acts thus, he dissolves the compact between him and his people; his authority is no longer binding, because illegal; and it is illegal, because he is acting *contrary to the laws* of that constitution, according to which, on being raised to the supreme power, he promised to govern. This conduct justifies opposition to his government: but I contend, that no *personal misconduct* in the ruler, no immorality in his own life, while he *governs according to law*, can either justify rebellion against him, or contempt of his authority.

Adam Clarke - Commentary on Romans

He goes on to explain the reason for that is that the only result of that type of thing can be absolute anarchy and confusion among the people. Later on, he does make this statement:

It must be allowed, notwithstanding, that, when a prince, howsoever heedful to the laws, is unrighteous in private life, his example is contagious: morality, banished from the throne, is discountenanced by the community[....]

Adam Clarke - Commentary on Romans

In other words, once the leader becomes immoral, morality tends to be discountenanced by the community, as well. The example is contagious. But his point is (and he's basically deriving it from what Paul is saying and the circumstances in which the Roman Christian may have found himself)...He is trying to tell them in the simplest possible terms, "You'd better obey that man. Regardless of what is going on in his private life, regardless of the rumors and the gossip [and Rome was a horribly gossipy city], regardless of the street corner gossip, don't worry about his private life. As long as the laws are being obeyed, and the administration is following the constitution, and things are going according to what they are supposed to be as far as the man in the street, *obey that authority*." This doctrine is pretty comprehensive, I think, in all of its parts.

I believe that Paul was concerned, in writing this, for the potential consequences of civil restlessness on the part of the church. I think he was very concerned about some of the things that he had been hearing, that people were saying, and people were doing, and people were objecting to. Because, interestingly enough, in the first five years of his reign, Nero was *incredibly* lenient in the administration of various penalties in law. He was, in his earliest years, a rather soft-hearted person. He changed after he had another woman become his consort and after he finally had to retire Seneca (his oldest and trusted advisor) and Burrus ([prefect of] the Praetorian Guard), and had to begin to make changes in the people who advised him; he, himself, began to change into more of a tyrant, a hard person, an unyielding person. It was at that point that he wound up having two of his rivals murdered almost immediately. It's a time when he had his wife murdered, Octavia, and on. It was a time when his advisors had changed. Prior to that time, he was really quite a different man. And Seneca expressed dismay, frankly, over the change that had taken place in his old friend, Nero, as a result of his retirement and Burrus' death. But I really believe that Paul, because of rumblings from Rome, was concerned about what might happen.

Six years later, a tragic event took place which really, in spades, underlined what Paul was talking about; and that he *did* have legitimate reason for concern. A fire broke out in the wooden shops and sheds at the east end of the Circus Maximus. That fire spread and raged for *six days* through the city of Rome. They thought it was under control at the end of the fourth day, it was almost stopped, but then it broke out again and the blaze went for two more days. *Two-thirds* of the city of Rome lay in ashes when that fire was over. Who knows how many people were dead as a result of the fire; how many people were crippled; and, of course, two-thirds of the population of Rome without homes and without any place to live. Nero was accused of setting the fire.

Arthur Weigall, in his biography of Nero, frankly believes that is preposterous. He feels that the records of his conduct before and during and in conjunction with the fire were inconsistent with any idea that he, himself, had set the fire. He was actually very busy. As soon as the fire had begun and word had come to him, he came back to the city of Rome, he began to personally supervise fighting the fire of the city. He set up, at his own expense, places where people could be sheltered and taken care of. He cut the price of grain in half so people could be fed and taken care of because of the loss. It goes on and on, the things that the man did. He wandered around the city without so much as a companion or a guard to protect his life in trying to get a feeling for what was taking place in the city that he had such an affection for.

There's no indication that the man himself had set fire to that city; but when the ashes had cooled, he began to be accused of it; and as a natural consequence of being accused of it himself, he ordered an investigation. This investigation brought out (as a natural result, I guess) some *very disturbing* things. Arthur Weigall...and I don't know if you'll have it in your library; it's a book that was published in 1930—a biography of Nero [*Nero: The Singing Emperor of Rome*] where he goes through and really develops the whole concept of the man, the changes that took place in his life. He doesn't see him nearly as the black figure that history has painted him—at least in the earlier part of his life. Later on, very dramatic changes. Especially at this point in his life, the burning of Rome *was* a watershed for himself, for Rome, and, unfortunately, for the church.

You see, the church...and this is basically the postulate of Weigall as he begins to develop this concept. He said that the church had adopted a policy, and readily refers to the city of Rome as "Babylon the Great". A very important part of their prophecies, which they talked about and relished, was the return of Christ and the events that would proceed the return of Christ; including, guess what, the fall of Babylon the Great (which he postulates the early Christian church saw as Rome, anticipated it as Rome). He had no doubt whatsoever that there was a great deal of conversation—coffee-shop and otherwise, a great deal of wine-shop conversation—about whether or not Rome was Babylon, what it meant, when it was taking place, what the events would involve. As a result of this, the implications are that, when the city began to burn, the Christians in the city (whether they were true Christians, or a sect of Christianity, or whatever they were) began to see it as the righteous judgment of God descending upon the city of Rome. And as the city began to burn, some of them were apparently heard to *say* that it

was the judgment of God. Things were said. The investigation brought out that many Christians had apparently...or indications are they had refused to assist in putting out fires in the city, claiming it was the judgment of God upon the town.

It's no big wonder then, if in the process of all this taking place, some people would accuse them of standing in the streets saying, "Burn, baby, burn." There would be no question that, if they refused in some cases to help put out the fire because they saw it as the judgment of God, that someone would say, "I wonder if these people tried to *hasten* the judgment of God by setting the fire themselves." And so they were rounded up; and they were tried; and, finally, a lot of them were tied to crosses around Nero's garden and set afire one night and burned—as supposedly they had caused the city of Rome to burn, so *they* should burn.

All the Christians in Rome weren't martyred on this occasion. There were continuing persecutions for some little time upon them; but as the months went by it died down, and finally the Christians in Rome began to realize, "No, we are not going to be wiped out." And, you know, you begin to realize that maybe Paul had something in mind, maybe he was thinking about where this thing might have gone. And it's *so sad* to realize that a church, or a group of people claiming to be Christians—because maybe they had been involved in setting dates, because they had been involved in elaborating prophecies against a people and against the moral corruption with such vehemence *without* showing the love that should have gone along with it, because in the process of the time they were not working to try to be good citizens in their community, because they weren't the kind of people who maybe really were concerned about their neighbors, or maybe because they were recluses and stayed away from their neighbors—when the time came, were misunderstood and there was *no one to defend them*. Six years before...*six years* before, Paul had written to the Christians in Rome; and some of the people who first heard these words read before them in a group in Rome were probably burning that night around Nero's garden. And six years earlier they had heard these words read:

Romans 13

AKJV

¹ Let every soul be subject to the higher [authorities]. For there is no [authority] but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

² Whoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Will you then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same:

⁴ For he is the minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bears not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath on him that does evil.

⁵ [Wherefore] you must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.

⁶ For for this cause pay you tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually on this very thing.

⁷ Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

⁸ Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loves another has fulfilled the law.

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*Should a Christian Submit
to the State?*

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