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Praying for our Leaders

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The President's

DESK

Tom Shepherd

Praying for Our Leaders

As I write, the United States has recently gone through a somewhat bitter presidential election. President Barack Obama won a clear victory over Mitt Romney, though the popular vote was not overwhelming. It is said that about half the country woke up on November 7 elated and the other half dejected. This probably overstates the involvement of Americans in politics, but nonetheless, strong political polarization exists in the country. Whether the candidates for whom you voted won or lost, you face the question, "How shall I relate to the government?" If you think the government is doing things incorrectly, what is your responsibility?

Two passages in the New Testament are particularly instructive regarding our duties and responsibilities in relationship to the government: Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

The two passages have quite a striking parallelism in thought and instruction. Both link government officials fairly tightly to God and indicate that government leaders are God's servants. (The passage in 1 Peter may seem to state these two points less strongly, but both indicate that the role of government leaders is to affirm and reward doers of good and to punish those who do evil.) Both authors instruct Christians to submit to government officials, apparently without qualification. Both writers, within the immediate context, talk about the idea of "conscience." And both give specific directives regarding respect due to government leaders, either paying of taxes and levies or expressions of honor to be given to officials.

Both positive and seemingly negative concepts arise from consideration of these two passages. It is eminently clear that we are required to be good citizens, living in accordance with the laws of the land and particularly honoring our government leaders and paying our taxes. The apostles give no space for rejecting such duties. Indeed, Peter indicates that by living a good life among pagans the faithful Christian silences the slander of "the ignorance of foolish people" (1 Peter 2:15, ESV). Paul, presenting the mirror image of this, indicates that those who practice evil will be punished by the authorities and face judgment from God (Rom. 13:2-4).

Paul instructs Christians in 1 Timothy 2:1-4 to pray for leaders so that they can live quiet and peaceful lives. He intimates that these prayers can lead to the salvation of these government officials. Likewise, Peter presents a theme of submission in 1 Peter 2:13, where he illustrates how Christians in the world give faithful witness that is honored by God and noticed by people, some of whom will be won to the faith.

Thus it is clear, that no matter who wins an election, we have a responsibility to pray for them and abide within the laws of the land. We thereby give Christian witness to our recognition of God's ordering of society.

But what if the government goes wrong and establishes evil laws that clearly break God's moral requirements? Many thinking people scratch their heads when they read Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 because of the apparently unqualified way in which these passages seem to support earthly governments and leaders, even evil and scandalous ones. How can these governments and leaders be set up by God? How can Christian apostles call for submission to them?

A few years back I was teaching 1 and 2 Peter and came to the section in 1 Peter 2 and 3 that speaks of submission to government leaders (and even unscrupulous slave owners). One of the students, who came from an area of the world where the government was unstable, protested. He described how marauding bands of armed young men used to go about the countryside in his homeland, intimidating people. This student insisted that it was necessary to stand up to people like this and not to give in to them.

His impassioned speech forced me to return to study 1 Peter to see if I had missed something in the apostle's instruction. What I discovered was quite interesting. Peter (and we can add Paul here as well) *never separates the language of submission from the language of justice.*

Both apostles display this concept by their use of moral language in describing the duties of government officials. These leaders are supposed to praise what is *good* and punish what is *bad* (Rom. 13:3, 4; 1 Peter 2:14). Christians who are persecuted for doing what is *right* receive God's approval while they are suffering *unjustly* in the pagan setting (1 Peter 2:18-20).

According to both apostles, God is the standard of goodness, and His laws set parameters within which all human behavior will be judged. The reference to judgment language makes this clear. Paul notes that all the world stands accused before God (Romans 1–3), and Peter stresses that judgment begins with the household of God and moves outward to all others (1 Peter 4:12-19).

Peter in particular has an interesting way of reordering the Christian's sense of what power is all about. He does this in several ways, but there are two that impact our understanding of how to relate to civil government.

The first is found in Peter's intriguing use of the Greek word for "conscience." He uses this term in 1 Peter 2:19; and 3:16, 21. We usually think of the conscience as an internal moral compass that guides you to do what is right. But in Peter's setting it stands for a different idea, which in English is better translated with the word *conscious*.

For Peter, this term refers to a moral compass that is *outside* of one's self. It is being conscious of the goals and values of the primary group around you. For us as Christians this external moral compass has shifted. We have come out of darkness into God's marvelous light (2:9). The surrounding society with its futile ways (1:18) is no longer that which guides our life. We have become "conscious" of a new primary group—God!

Since God is the new center of attention, our sense of moral responsibility is seen in this new light, including our relationship to government and government officials. Now submission to leaders does not arise from self-interest, fear, or external pressure. Even if government leaders bring suffering on Christians, the believer experiences the approbation of God. Our new relationship to God sets us free from the rulership of the world in our lives, but brings a freedom in obedience to God.

But that returns pretty much full circle to the question of how to relate to governments or government officials who go wrong. How can Peter and Paul say that these people are given their roles by God and that to resist them is wrong (Rom. 13:1, 2 and 1 Peter 2:13-14)? One small word in 1 Peter 2:14 is the answer and is the second of our points that helps explain the negative aspect of submission to government officials. It is a Greek word that means "creation, creature."

In the setting in 1 Peter 2, the word is usually translated "institution." There are a few problems with that terminology. First, the ancient world did not have what we usually call "institutions." Second, the term *institution* makes some think of either an organization or even a building, but it thereby loses the theological implications of the underlying Greek term. Peter implies by the use of this term that all human governments are *creations*. That is, they are not the Creator.

By this means, Peter reorders power structures in our world. All powers, all governments, all government officials, at whatever level, must answer to God. As the moral Arbiter of the world, He sets the standards by which all are judged. Thus, *good* and *bad*, *right* and *wrong* must be seen according to His standards.

What this means is that governments and government officials are God's servants, and the standards of right they are to administer are God's standards. If they step away from these ideals, then they are no longer fulfilling their God-given function. At such times, we must disobey them in order to obey God (Acts 5:29).

So why would Paul and Peter say that these leaders are set up by God? It is by this means that the apostles teach us that all these government officials are *answerable to God*. If the apostles indicated that these leaders were *not* set up by God, it would suggest that they were *not* answerable to Him. But He did set them up, and they must answer to Him. We are to pray for them no matter what their party or affiliation. We are to obey their just laws, pay our taxes, and live upright, moral lives that will convict them of the truth. If they go awry, we are to be witnesses for the good and true even if it costs us suffering. We are in this world, but not of it. Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and we are waiting for our King to come from there to take us home.

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