



Dear Phil

OBEYING SPEED LIMITS

I don't think God cares if one breaks a speed limit as long as one is a responsible citizen and aware of safety issues. It is nonsensical to travel at 55mph when one has a wide straight highway without intersections.... —Jim Jester [See entire letter, "Letters to the Editor," page 4, this issue]

Dear Jim,

I think you answered your own objections to the speed limit when you said, "We agreed to follow their rules when we applied for the driver's license. In that sense then, we should keep our word." You're right. We should keep our word. And that's another good reason to keep the speed limit.

Your third paragraph, however, raises a very important issue. Are we to obey only 'good' rulers or are we to obey all our rulers? The historical context of Romans 13:1-7 and its NT parallels (1 Peter 2:13-14; Titus 3:1) are crucial to deciding this question. In Romans, Paul is writing to Christians living under the Roman rule of despotic and deranged Nero. This was the same empire that had (at times)

brutally suppressed the Jews (Luke 13:1), that was responsible for the crucifixion of Christ (1 Cor. 2:8), and that had treated Paul unjustly (Acts 16:22, 37; 2 Cor. 11:25). Just a few year prior to writing this epistle, the Roman emperor Claudius summarily expelled all Jews, including Christian Jews, from Rome, displacing many and unjustly causing them hardship (cf. Acts 18:2).

About six years later, after his first Roman imprisonment and just before his second, fatal imprisonment, Paul writes to Titus, "Remind [the Cretans] to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed" (Tit. 3:1). Without any further qualification, 'rulers' and 'authorities' in this text necessarily include the authority of Nero and his delegated subordinates in the Roman Empire.

Peter, writing on the eve, if not after, the death of Paul and during the time of Nero's persecution of Christians, admonishes Christians, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right" (1 Pet. 2:13-14). Notice that Peter does not say "every human institution that punishes evildoers and praises those who do right." He says "every human institution"! And this comes from the same apostle who boldly told the Sanhedrin, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

The same is true of Paul in Romans 13:1-4. In verses 1-2 he states the principle that since all governing authorities are ordained by God, to resist them is to resist God's will. He says, literally, "there is no authority except by God, and the existing [authorities] have been put in place by God; therefore whoever resists the authority, resists the ordinance of God." In verses 3-4, Paul

moves from a universal statement about where government gets its power, to the purpose of that power: *to reward good and punish evil*. There is, however, nothing in the language of vv. 3-4 that even hints that Paul is delimiting which authorities are God-ordained to only those who are not a terror to good works. Rather, he is enunciating the general character of government.

To be just is the God-given responsibilities of government, and all rulers will answer to God for their use of power. However, the Bible does not say that failure to be just voids their God-ordained status. Darius was a bigoted idolater, wrongly requiring prayer to none but himself, but that was not grounds for Daniel to resist his unjust sentencing to the lion's den. Daniel illustrates both submission to his authority and obedience to God, disobeying the former only when it was necessary to be obedient to God. Further, the Bible does not say that achievement of power by criminal means indicates that such an authority is not God-ordained. Since God governs the affairs of men and puts up whom He will and puts down whom He will (Psa. 75:6-7), none get "up" whom God did not put up.

I have not taken Romans 13:1-2 out of context. Rather, the theory that only those governments that are good are God-ordained turns Paul's teaching (and Peter's) on its head and reads into it what is not there. In conclusion, the fact that a governing authority exists doesn't mean it's just, but does mean it is ordained by God.

Sincerely,
Philip Brown ■

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