

The Freedom of a Clear Conscience

In drawing my previous article to its conclusion I noted that there's freedom in submitting to the authorities that God has placed in our lives—in the home, in the workplace, in the church, as well as in the civil government. For Christians, we're now able to obey from the heart in a way that we never were before our salvation. We're truly free in the gospel. Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (to sin)" Galatians 5:1. As God's children, we're commanded to submit to God-ordained authorities. When we refuse to submit to legitimate authority we're not gaining our freedom, but rather, we're losing our freedom. In our rebellion we fall back into slavery, if only for the moment. To rebel against God's truth is to always lose. When we seek our own way, rather than God's, we never gain no matter what we may think in the moment. So, then, we can have freedom from fear in our submission to proper authority.

Look with me now in Romans 13:4, "...for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." In the context of this passage the phrase, "bearing the sword" speaks of the right of punishment given to civil authorities for those who break the law. It's generally accepted that this punishment would include capital punishment where appropriate. The civil authorities, then, are those who're called to, "carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." Along with freedom from fear, I want to look now at:—the freedom of a clear conscience.

"Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience" (13:5). Paul has already spoken of the conscience back in 2:14-15. "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves.....They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." The scriptures are clear in calling us to pay close attention to our conscience (Acts 23:1; Romans 9:1). Paul writes, "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man" (Acts 24:16). It's crucial that we're constantly informing our consciences by the scriptures. It's extremely dangerous to ignore the warnings of a properly informed conscience.

Beginning in verse 6 Paul adds, "For because of this (your conscience) you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing." Verse 7 concludes with a summary of this entire section, "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed....respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." Submission to every legitimate authority is commanded by God. This will include the civil government which is our primary focus in this series. I want to conclude this series with some brief points of practical application.

—Love your enemies. Many in political office are enemies of Christ and enemies of the gospel but Jesus taught us to “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you...” (Luke 6:27-28). Christians need to be careful how we speak about those in authority in the government with which we disagree. Address the issues while not attacking the person.

—Pray for our civil authorities. (Luke 6:28; 1Timothy 2:1-3)

—Serving in civil government is a good vocation for many Christians. God placed Joseph as the second highest ranking official in the land behind the Egyptian Pharaoh (Genesis 41). William Wilberforce was used mightily of God to fight against the evils of the slave trade in 18th and early 19th century England.

—We must never submit to any laws that require sinful behavior. There are times when we may have to say with Peter “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Should we have to undergo punishment from the authorities for our civil disobedience we’re always to trust God and his Sovereign work in our lives no matter the final outcome of our, necessary, disobedience.

Church tradition teaches us that both Paul and Peter were martyred in Rome during the persecution of the church by the Roman Emperor Nero. Even in our own country some have endured suffering for standing for Jesus Christ. No matter the difficulty or loss we can be assured that God is working all things for our good and his glory.

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