ROMANS
THE CHRISTIAN'S CONSTITUTION

Study Thirty-Two

How to Be a Godly Rebel

Romans 13:1–7

Christians are not only to obey our God, we are to be good citizens in our land. Models of such. And to teach our children the same.
—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

We usually don't think of rebels as godly. And yet, some of the world's most godly Christians have rebelled against their governments. In the 1930s, Corrie ten Boom's family broke the law by hiding Jews from the Nazis. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor in Germany, defied Hitler by speaking against the persecution of Jews. In the 1950s, Brother Andrew founded Open Doors, a ministry known for smuggling Bibles into communist countries.

We deeply admire these godly rebels, and we could list many more. What links them is their determination to follow Christ above all others, even when doing so sent them to prison and, for some, cost them their lives. They followed the example of Peter and the early Christians, declaring with one voice, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

Such drastic measures, however, are not the norm. As we'll discover in this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, Paul instructed the Roman Christians living under Nero's tyrannical rule to "submit to governing authorities" (Romans 13:1). This was to be their usual practice as followers of Christ.

Well-meaning Christians sometimes go to extremes on this issue. Some promote a lawless attitude, bordering on a militant stance against government. Others exude indifference toward civil matters, claiming that they're citizens of heaven and shouldn't care about earthly affairs. These two extremes, however, can lead to shirking our duties as law-abiding citizens.

Paul encouraged us to be model citizens and to obey the law. Submission to established authorities should be our normal response to government, and in Romans 13, Paul explained why.

PREPARE YOUR HEART

I will pursue Your commands,
For You expand my understanding.
Teach me Your decrees, O Lord;
I will keep them to the end. (Psalm 119:32–33)

Reflect on the psalmist's godly pursuit and deep desire to learn God's Word as you write your own prayer, asking the Lord to help you keep His truths to the end.

TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

It's one thing to declare our faith in Jesus as our Savior, but it's another thing to live what we believe. How to make faith practical is Paul's subject beginning in Romans 12. "Give your bodies to God," Paul urged (Romans 12:1). "Love each other with genuine affection" (12:10). "Serve the Lord enthusiastically" (12:11). "Bless those who persecute you" (12:14). "Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep" (12:15). "Never pay back evil with more evil" (12:17), and "conquer evil by doing good" (12:21).

Turning the page to Romans 13, we add more shoe leather to our faith—submitting to governing authorities. Do you think this was a hot-button issue with his Roman readers? What might have made obeying the government controversial for them?

Let's step into the sandals of the early Christians in Rome as we hear Paul's teaching on Christian citizenship.

Observation: Civil Obedience

During observation, the first step of *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, thoughtfully read *Romans 13:1–7* to find out what it says.[1] Look for the biblical guidelines that the text is conveying about *inappropriate* resistance to authority.

Reasons Not to Resist—Romans 13:1–5

As you read through *Romans 13:1–5*, find the reasons we should not resist governmental authority. First, note the *theological reason*. What words did Paul use to support this point in *13:1–2*?

> ***God has ordained government. It is called one of the divine institutions, just as marriage, just as home and family.*** **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

Second, note the *external reason*. How did Paul describe the consequences of violating the law in *13:3–4*? How did he refer to "the authorities" in 13:4, and what is their purpose?

The third reason, the *internal reason*, is specified in *13:5*. What is the primary benefit of submitting to established authorities?

Reasons to Obey—Romans 13:6–7

Paul underscored the importance for Christians to follow the law regarding paying taxes—which was a particularly controversial subject. In *Romans 13:6–7*, what commands did Paul give, and what were his reasons for these commands? What is the guiding financial principle in 13:7?

> ***Therefore, as good citizens, we are to render what is due, and in the process, we are not to grouse about it, knowing that the blessings are ours in abundance.***
> **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

Interpretation: Appropriate Obedience to Established Authorities

The step of interpretation helps us come to an understanding of what the biblical passage means. It is a wise investment when we take time to explore terms to gain a better understanding of God's Word.

In *Romans 13:1–7*, Paul stated that all governments are under God. Deepen your understanding of the term *government* in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible* available at biblegateway.com. Read as many articles as you'd like to. What did you learn that sheds some light on godly rebellion and inappropriate resistance?

> ***Paul is not writing about a rebellious government; he's writing to rebellious citizens or to those who have become simply passive.*** **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

We observed that one of the reasons for obeying established authorities is for the sake of conscience. Read *13:5* in several other Bible translations such as the NET, MSG, and J. B. Phillips. How would you explain this verse in practical terms to someone?

Civil obedience relieves our conscience. You're driving 40 miles an hour. The speed limit is 45! Suddenly, some distance behind you, a white and black police cruiser appears with its light going around. Your conscience doesn't bother you. You look down, and you're going 40. He's not coming after me! WHEW! Goes right by you. Isn't that a great sound? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Paul emphasized in *Romans 13:6–7* that we must pay "everyone what [we] owe them," and he specified taxes, revenue, respect, and honor. Based on the various translations, how would you explain civic responsibilities pertaining to each?

What's the difference? Taxes obviously would be property taxes, school taxes, road taxes, and taxes that are required of us as citizens for the pleasure of living in this land. Customs would have to do with imports and exports. Fear has to do with respect for those who are in authority, and honor has to do with giving them proper esteem, worth, and allegiance. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Correlation: Civic Obedience and Godly Rebellion

We can get off track if we focus only on a single passage—unaware of the other references that can help us understand the subject more accurately. Comparing our biblical text with other Bible passages reveals times when godly rebellion is appropriate.

How did the Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, embody courage in the face of tyranny, according to *Exodus 1:11–21*?

Daniel, a Jewish man taken captive to Babylon, demonstrated unwavering faithfulness to God while remaining loyal to the king. However, when the king passed a law that violated Daniel's religious beliefs and practices, what did Daniel do, according to *Daniel 6:7–22*? What helped Daniel prioritize obedience to God's commands over human authority?

How do both stories give balance to our interpretation of *Romans 13:1–7*?

> ***There are times when rebellion is appropriate—when standing against government decisions is right and we have scriptural proof for that.***
> **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

Compare *Matthew 17:24–27 and 22:15–22 with Romans 13:1–7*. How did Jesus' life and teachings emphasize both our civic duties and our primary allegiance to God?

> ***Obeying God is always right. There's no exception. God says it, we do it. His Word teaches it, we do a careful study so that we are interpreting it correctly, we obey it. Our allegiance to Him is total, not partial. And it is ultimate. Always right to obey God.*** **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

Application: Obey God Always and Render to All What Is Due

Obeying God is *always* the right thing to do. What current situations in your life are requiring you to express your allegiance to God? How can you request the Holy Spirit's assistance to give you courage to do the right thing?

> *Someday you'll have to stand up publicly and speak the truth. Do it! No matter what it means. Today there'll be people who will call you a fool. Tomorrow you'll be known as a hero. Do it, do what's right. Don't hesitate. Speak the truth.*
> **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

Obeying the government is *usually* the right thing to do. What things might your government ask you to do that would be against your conscience? How can you train your children and grandchildren or encourage other believers to keep Christian principles?

> *These are treacherous days in which we live. And I believe if not my children, my grandchildren will live to see the day when active resistance will be essential to maintain Christian principles.* **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

Think about the biblical guidelines to appropriate civil obedience that you learned from this passage. What has the Holy Spirit pinpointed to you that would help you become a better earthly citizen?

> *Government is on our side in matters pertaining to law and order, and we are to be good citizens that obey its rules.* **—Pastor Chuck Swindoll**

A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your inerrant Word! Help me be a good citizen. Also, give me the courage to do what is right, no matter the cost. Help me to train my children to have primary allegiance to You. Keep my heart loving You so that I can obey You above all. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Mirlenda Noëlliste in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.
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