

## Submission to Human Law

ROMANS 13. —BELOVED BRETHREN AND SISTERS, The chapter read this morning contains guidance upon a subject having an important bearing upon us in the truth, and one upon which the very reception of the truth creates a necessity for guidance. The position to which the Gospel calls us is that of waiting for the Lord from heaven, of whom the truth teaches that he is King of kings and Lord of lords; that he is the rightful governor of the nations; that in due time, there will be no other power upon earth, and no other law recognized but his own. Now, without guidance, we might argue that these things being true, we are absolved from allegiance to the powers that now exist; that we are consequently under no obligation to obey. The chapter comes in and stops any such apparently right conclusion. I say **apparently** right; it is only apparently so; because the truth does not teach us that Christ's kingdom now exists. Campbellism would teach us that; the logical upshot of which would be rebellion against kings and governments. If the government of Christ is now in force in the earth, it would be natural to say: "We recognize no king but Christ, and decline to obey the laws of other rulers." But the truth teaches us that the power of the Lord Jesus, as king over the whole earth, is not to come into practical force until his return at the season appointed for the manifestation of the sons of God. Then the Lord will be king over all the earth: there will be but one Lord. All other lords will be broken like a potter's vessel. The present question is, What is, meanwhile, our relation to the powers that be? In answer to that question, this chapter tells us something that prevents us from being rebels against the authorities of the time, or from being political plotters or political agitators in any shape. It prevents us, indeed, from taking any part in the political movements of the time, and shuts us up to the position of "strangers and pilgrims," whose energy is all required for the work of preparing for the great administration of authority that is to come on earth in God's appointed time, of which we shall have a share, if God account us worthy.

*"Let every soul be subject to the higher powers."* This passage practically deals with the question: "How can we, who are subject to God, submit to those who are opposed to Him?" The answer is, that although on the surface it appears otherwise, there is no power but what is of God. The kings of the earth have one object in what they do, and God, who controls them, has another. The king of Assyria went against Israel for his own aggrandizement; but, in reality, he was an instrument invisibly wielded by God against his people. "*Howbeit*," said the prophet, "**he meaneth not so**" (Isa. 10:7). He does it to aggrandize himself, but he cannot go beyond his appointed line. "*Shall the rod shake itself against him who uses it?*" So it is with all the kingdoms of the earth; God is making use of them; God superintends them by the angels of His power. Daniel tells us, in a sense that does not conflict with the Gospel of the kingdom, that He ruleth in the kingdoms of men, setting up some and putting down others. The kingdoms now existing are provisionally of God's appointment. God's purpose to make the earth a habitation of order, love, intelligence, and glory, requires a preliminary prevalence of evil, and yet the evil must be regulated. If evil were allowed to run riot, it would make the world a desert in which it would be impossible for the preliminary work of trial in patient obedience to be done; we could never assemble here this morning if evil were not controlled in its

operations. There is a necessity for a certain machinery to exist, and God has appointed that machinery, but only for mechanical service. It is, so to speak, but the scaffolding for the erection of the future building. They are a crude work; the saints are called to a higher work in all respects. Even now, it is highest work to preach the gospel of the future kingdom.

Paul's explanations on this point are perfectly necessary. These governments are of God's appointment; therefore, if you resist them, you will be resisting God. The truth teaches us to be the most obedient subjects in the realm. It imposes upon us the attitude of subjects, having nothing to do with State questions, except to obey, and give honour and respect to the constituted authorities for the time being, when their commands do not conflict with what God requires. Submission and respect, in these circumstances, are a duty. We disobey if we refuse them. The Quaker who refuses to comply with the requirements of the Court, is no model for a Christadelphian. He won't take off his hat: in this he thinks he stands on scriptural ground. He does the opposite. The taking off the hat in the presence of the king is a mere conventional respect, which we are, apostolically, bound to yield. The Quakers are very disobedient to the apostles in many things, although they profess so much to be exemplary.

Then Paul urges as a sort of collateral consideration, that governors are not a terror to those who do right, which is true, apart from the special experiences of the believers in Paul's day, and Paul does not refer to them. Writing to the Romans before the authorities at Rome had lent themselves to the work of persecution, his remarks have probable reference to their lenity, and not to the rulers of the Jews, at whose hands he had experienced the principal part of his sufferings. His dealings with the Roman authorities up to the time of writing, had rather been in the way of invoking their protection; as when he was seized in Jerusalem and rescued from the mob by the Roman soldiers, and again when his status as a Roman freeman was recognized as a protection against scourging, and again when the Roman captain gave him an escort to Caesarea, to get him out of the way of a Jewish plot to kill him, and again when he claimed the protection of the Roman law as against Jewish intrigue. *"I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews I have done no wrong ... I appeal unto Caesar."* In a general way, the statement is true of all governments, that it is only the evilly disposed who suffer from them; with those who are submissive the authorities have nothing to do but protect them. Apart from bad laws, they inflict hardship on those only who do evil; as Peter says, *"Who is he that will harm you if ye follow that which is good?"* *"Wherefore,"* says Paul, summarizing his argument, *"we must be in subjection, not only for wrath, but for conscience sake."* That is, not only as a matter of expediency in the sense of keeping on the favourable side of the law, but as a matter of principle, the disciples of Christ have nothing to do with the rulers but to be subject -- not to resist, nor to take any part in the process of resisting, what they do, or may think well to do. In this aspect it is apparent it would be much out of place for brethren or sisters to take part in the movements to overthrow governments, movements, which even if successful, we know would bring nothing but anarchy; but whether successful or not successful, we are excluded from taking part in till the Lord himself begins. *"Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."* Church-rates to whom Church-rates; it is no business of ours what the governments do with the money they extort from us in the shape of

tribute. The tribute, levied on the Christians in Rome, went to pay for the support of idolatrous temples; how unscripturally, therefore, many are acting, who have a great reputation for being wise, and who are in their own way very honest, who suffer restraint rather than pay Church-rates. It is really simple in them to let the state take £20 in the shape of goods sold under value, when they could get off by paying £5. It is not a matter of conscience; we have nothing to do with the uses to which the State puts the money. All we have to do is to pay when ordered, and see that we do not countenance the abominations which they uphold. The "rights of man" are no standard for the action of a Christian: abstractly, God only has "rights." Our only concern is, to know what He would have us to do on this point. His will is plain. We are to submit, "*looking for the blessed hope*" of the manifestation of His power, in which the saint is to participate after trial. We need not and must not reach our hands to the political machinery which at present exists. We know how hopeless it is for human efforts to make the world better, for the world is 6,000 years old in the experiment of human good, and as far off as ever from the condition of things desired. Effective good requires infallible wisdom and infallible power. When these are on the earth, it will be a satisfaction and a glory to have to do with government. At present it is vexation of spirit. Stand aloof from human movements and lay hold on God's movement, which He has given us the honour of assisting.

Another thing mentioned in this chapter is equally important in its way, though more of a private character. Do not get into debt. "*Owe no man anything but love*"; it is an apostolic precept. You can be under a debt of gratitude as much as you like, but keep money out of the obligation; this is good advice, even apart from precept, but here is precept, therefore a binding rule on those who submit to apostolic law. There are many evils connected with debt. "*The borrower is servant to the lender.*" The debt is something between you which has power to cloud friendship; it is always an anxiety; a worm that gnaws the roots of joy. At last, perhaps, it is a seed of hatred and strife. Keep the air clear of debt, and the sun will have a better chance. But some say we cannot help it, and doubtless there are times when people cannot help it, but in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they can help it, by denying themselves. The advantages that come of the borrowing are very dearly bought, in a higher than a commercial sense. Most borrowers find that out by experience, but it is better not to let experience teach in this matter, since we have a command; it is better to obey the command and not to get into debt; a recognition of duty in this matter will greatly help. There is nothing like duty as the motive principle of life; applied to this matter, it would save worlds of trouble. Acting on this principle of not getting into debt, people would be saved much trouble. Once get into debt, the difficulty of getting out is greater than dreamt of, but some people do not think about it. They see an opportunity; they conceive a desire in a certain direction; and borrowing is as easy with them as possible. This is wrong. They have no business to handle money that is not their own; they are not sure they will live to repay; their health may fail, prospects may desert them and the lender is robbed, and that the lender may have plenty is no weakening of the obligation to give him his own. In our circumstances, it is specially important to be particular on this point. The Lord may be upon us any day, and how discomfiting for him to find us with hands and feet tied in debt and unable to do anything for his name, for the burden we have taken on our shoulders. There is nothing but wisdom in this precept: a noble-hearted lender may forgive debt; but we must not presume on this; nay, rather refuse to be forgiven and insist on the advantage of being free and independent. Shut your ears to flattering projects. Say

not, "I will pay up in a year." Ye know not the year is yours. Even if ye live, things may go wrong, and ye in a fix will have to say with humiliation, "I would pay but I cannot." Traffic in love without limit, for love is the fulfilling of the law. We are allowed to contract indefinite obligations in this direction; the interest is sweet to the payer and receiver, and leaves a man richer in the article when paid. At the same time, beware of counterfeits; beware of such as talk of love, and on the strength of it get into debt and bear false witness. Love is the fulfilling of the law only in the sense that it is the sentiment that leads to the spontaneous doing of what the law enjoins, and abstinence from what it forbids. It will not do to put love in the place of obedience; this is characteristic of the false religions of the day. We must always guard against the misapplication of good principles, that we may see the right fulfilment of all in the Kingdom of God.

(Taken from "*Seasons of Comfort*" Volume 1, Pages 128-131, by Bro. R. Roberts.)