



**“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God,” Romans 13:1.**

## **The Christian's Civic Obligations**

**Lesson Aim:** To stress the believer's dual responsibility of a citizen of his country and as a servant of Christ.

**L516. Date:** May 1964. **Text:** Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-7.

**Topic:** Citizenship; Service: To Country.

INTRODUCTION—The Christian is a citizen of two worlds—heaven and earth. If he is truly conscientious about one, he will be concerned about both. Dual citizenship does not relieve us of responsibility toward either. The best Christian makes the best citizen. Therefore, obedience to laws and payment of taxes is as much a Christian's duty as praying at church. Such consecrated citizenship promotes a better nation and honors Christ.

Most of us are familiar with the song that begins, “This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through.” Too often this expresses a Christian's attitude to life here on earth. Many seem to feel that they are just tourists—tourists who will only be given warning tickets for speeding, who are not subject to the customs of the particular place or country, who pull the flowers and litter the ground because they are “just passing through” and never expect to be back. Yet, this philosophy is completely contrary to that envisioned in the Bible. This matter is discussed primarily in Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7, and I Peter 2:11-17.

Today's lesson deals with the obligations of the Christian citizen. It will speak much of “Christian citizenship,” by which is meant a child of God who tries to be a faithful citizen of his nation. John B. Streater offers this definition: “Christian citizenship is the intelligent outreach of a believer who not only takes the gospel and the benefits of salvation for himself but who seeks for others and for his community, state, and nation as well the power of that gospel and the benefits of that salvation.”

## EXPOSITION

### I. GOVERNMENTS AND TAXES, Matthew 22:15-22.

It is fortunate that Jesus has spoken positively concerning the payment of taxes by the people of God. This was a special problem to the highly nationalistic Jews. During the New Testament period they were under the control of the Roman Empire, ruled over by the Caesars in Rome. The entire government was pagan. Judaism was looked upon as a “legal religion” and the Jews were permitted to carry on their traditional worship. The rest of the empire (including the Christians) was subjected to paganistic emperor worship. Naturally, as the Jews generally hated the Romans and wished release from them, the question arose whether a Jew should pay taxes to the Romans.

To refuse to pay taxes meant the Jews would have to rebel against governmental authority. It meant an insurrection and probably war. Even so, many of the Jews were willing to risk it. Others were more cautious and tried to choose the lesser of the two evils and pay the taxes, though somewhat grudgingly. So it was that someone brought the question to Jesus. **“What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?”**

Jesus immediately understood the intent of the question. It was not to get information, but to trick Him, that the question was asked. If He had approved the payment of taxes to the Romans, the Pharisees would have accused Him of disloyalty to the nation. If He had disapproved the payment of taxes, the Herodians (who supported Roman rule), would have accused Him of treason. Perceiving the wicked intent behind the question, Jesus asked for the coin used to pay tribute (taxes). Asking whose image and superscription was thereon, they replied, “Caesars.” Then Jesus gave the memorable statement, **“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.”** This answer satisfied both Herodians and Pharisees, leaving neither a cause for argument.

How does this statement apply to the Christian's civic obligations? First, it recognizes that the Christian does have a civic obligation. Some things are “Caesar's” and should be rendered to the local government. These things include: respect for government officials, obedience to laws, payment of taxes, and like duties demanded of the good citizen. Second, it recognizes that certain obligations are due to God also. Human government should be obeyed in all things except that which is directly opposed to the known will of God. In the event of such a conflict, the Christian must also “render unto

God the things that are God's."

## II. GOVERNMENTS AND GOD, 13:1-7.

1. Governmental authority extends over all men, even the people of God, verse 1. **"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers."** The expression, "every soul," is a Hebrew expression which means "each person." Not a single Christian is exempt from obedience to the State. Peter writes, **"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men,"** I Peter 2:13-15. Paul's command is that Christians "be subject" to the governmental powers. The word "power" designates rightful authority, and this is from God as its source. Paul was even saying, "Submit yourselves to the ordinances of the Roman government, pagan though it is, for no man is to live free from governmental authority." Though the government may have faults it is better than no government at all where absolute anarchy reigns.

2. Governmental authority has been ordained of God, verses 1-2. Civil authority derives its source and sanction from God. God intended that man live under authority. Society needs government for its own protection. Therefore God has ordained that government exists. What kind of government did God approve: monarchy, democracy, theocracy? Did He approve dictatorship or freedom? The Bible does not say that God approved any specific type of government. It is the principle of government which God approves. Paul writes to Titus, **"Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates . . ."** Titus 3:1. As God has not laid down one form of government as being the only right one, the Christian citizen must submit to whatever form of government he lives under. He must be obedient to its demands as far as he can without breaking the laws of God.

So much is the government a matter of God's ordination that resistance to the power of the State is condemned as equivalent to resistance to God Himself, verse 2. Of course, we are not to obey laws which are morally wrong, but short of this, submission, not resistance, is the Christian law. Christians in our own nation can press their congressmen for legislation to correct abuses, but they must take care regarding open rebellion against the established law of the land.

3. Governmental authority uses officers to enforce its laws and to

unwittingly accomplish God's purpose, verses 4, 6. Civil government has a providential purpose, for rulers are really servants of God. They cause no fear to the law-abiding, but only to the evil-doers. Twice Paul calls the governmental official "the minister of God" — a term used of those who served in the Temple services!

Does this mean that unsaved men are God ministers? Does it mean vile governments are ordained of Him? Those questions cannot be answered by a simple "Yes" or "No." God often uses evil rulers to accomplish His purpose in them against their will. God said to the Pharaoh of Egypt, **"For this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth,"** Exodus 9:16. Just so, a government may grow corrupt without destroying the fact that governmental authority is of divine ordination. For instance, a man and wife may make their marriage relationship a continual misery, but that does not annul God's approval of marriage.

4. Governments should devote their authority to fulfilling the purposes of God. It is tragic that this is not commonly practiced. It is an implication of the depravity of the human heart. In recent years governments have arisen which are dedicated to stamping out the name and reverence of God from the earth. This is a perversion of governmental authority. It does not mean that all governments are evil nor that governmental authority should be cast aside. Those who live in the United States of America are very fortunate. This government is based upon Christian principles more than any other national government in the world. Moreover, each citizen has a voting power which can be used to change any policy of the government which he feels is not according to God's law. Such opportunity puts a great responsibility on the Christian citizen. By the power of vote he is a part of his government.

### **III. GOVERNMENTS AND CHRISTIANS, Romans 13:1-7.**

1. Christians are to be subject to the authority of their government, verses 1-2, 5. After setting out the demand for Christian subjection to government (verses 1-2), Paul gives the two-fold reason why (verse 5). He points out the moral reason for obedience: because government is ordained of God and to resist it is to resist that which is of Divine ordination. There is a certain punishment waiting those who disobey the laws of legal authority. The governmental official is bearing a sword (symbol of authority) for punishment of those who break the law. Therefore, if the Christian breaks the law, he is subject to punishment according to the law. Again, not only are we to be afraid of the consequences of law-breaking, but we are to obey

“for conscience sake.” Our own conscience will accuse or acquit us according to our guilt or innocence. If one breaks the laws of government approved of God, then he stands guilty before God as well as before the laws of the State. The most law-abiding person in the State will surely be the most dedicated Christian.

2. Christian submission to the government is evidenced in the payment of taxes, verse 6. This is the simplest and yet clearest instance of our duty toward the government under which we live. This is, as Jesus said, “rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” For a Christian to falsify an income tax return is a crime against the State and a sin against God. Christian citizenship brings great responsibilities upon each believer.

3. Christian submission to government is evidenced in respect paid to governmental officials, verse 7. This verse summarizes all the duties of Christian citizens discussed previously. W. H. Griffith Thomas explains it thus; “The teaching is now summed up by a practical appeal. **‘Render to all their dues.’** Four aspects of civil authority are mentioned: (1) Personal, or property taxes, ‘tribute to whom tribute is due’; (2) export, or import, ‘custom to whom custom’; (3) fear, or veneration of the chief authority, ‘fear to whom fear’; (4) honor or respect to his subordinates, ‘honor to whom honor.’” Herein are enjoined both duty and courtesy. Both are important. The parent who permits his child to disrespect civil authority (policemen, judges, etc.) by use of slang names is failing in his duties as a citizen. Phillips translation of Romans 13 says of the official, “The officer is God’s servant for your protection.” Therefore, though the man may be evil, he holds a position which helps work out good will and peace in the social order. This is God’s purpose in civil government. Once again, Phillips translates, “You should, therefore, obey the authorities, not simply because it is the safest, but because it is the right thing to do.”

CONCLUSION — The institution of the State is according to God’s will and plan that man might have discipline and that anarchy might not reign. No particular method of government is necessarily expressive of the Divine will. The Christian’s duties to his government are as obligatory as his duties to his church. Even so, in making the conscience the ground of obedience the Apostle shows that the limit of Christian obedience to the State is the will of God. (See Acts 5:39, 40, 42.) If our duties as citizens were fully performed, what a great witness for God it would constitute.

D. L. Moody was once criticized for having taken a positive stand on a political issue in his community. His critic reminded him that he was a Christian and a “citizen of heaven.” Mr. Moody answered, “True, but at the present I vote in Cook County, Illinois.” Wherever you vote, be faithful to

your State and to your God. Both expect it of you!

### **QUESTIONS**

1. How would you define “Christian citizenship”?
2. Why did Jesus make a statement on payment of taxes?
3. In what sense is government ordained of God?
4. Why should all men be submissive to governmental authority?
5. How are governmental offices the “ministers of God”?
6. Are evil governments and wicked rulers approved of God? Explain.
7. How does conscience effect our submission to government?
8. In what way can you become a better Christian citizen?
9. Do these scriptures forbid a Christian taking part in a rebellion against the government? Give reasons for your answer.