



ROMANS Part 119

Chapter 13:3-4

God's use of ungodly authorities.



For magistrates are not a fear to the good act, but to the evil. Now you do not want to be fearing the authority. Do good, and you will be having applause from it.

4 For it is God's servant for your good. Now if you should be doing evil, fear, for not feignedly is it wearing the sword. For it is God's servant, an avenger for indignation to him who is committing evil.

We established last week that, in this context, “the good act” is subjection to the superior authority, and “the evil act” is withstanding the authority. As this is the case, then “doing good” to a superior authority—that is, being subject to it—will always result in applause from that authority. What authority ever punishes subjection? Do you want to lead a mild and quiet life? Then be subject to the particular government and administrators that God has temporarily put in place over you. Otherwise, you will have reason to fear. For not feignedly is the authority wearing the sword.

I believe that Paul is talking about civil authority here, although not *necessarily* so. Religious leaders have no political authority over us now, but they could. We ought to be thankful, in any era, for the separation of church and state. It makes things easier on us—*though perhaps not*, as I am about to explain.

Faith is an inward reality that no one can take away. A superior civil or religious authority can only limit or outlaw outward expressions of faith, such as going to church, meeting together, preaching in the street, or publishing.

Are any of these outward expressions essential to our faith? No. Our faith is a matter of the inward, not the outward. Most or all of us have quit all outward, visible forms of organized religion anyway, such as going to church, so a law prohibiting church would not inconvenience or vex us in the least. So if a religious power were to suddenly be vested with civil authority and say,



“Stop going to church!” we would shrug and drink a beer. The Christians, only, would revolt, losing their minds and probably their lives. It would be their own fault for ignoring Paul’s prescription for peace. It would be their own fault for not realizing that God does not dwell in temples built by human hands. But what if the authority said to us, “Stop meeting *anywhere* to discuss your faith!”? This would still be cause for shrugging and beer, as most of us have no one to fellowship with anyway.

What if a religious authority with civil power told me, Martin Zender, to stop publishing my website? To stop making videos? To stop writing my newsletter? The answer to this question should not even be in doubt—especially since I am asking it of myself and you know what a stickler I am for Paul’s advice and how literally I take it. Of course, I would stop publishing. Would this affect my personal faith? Not in the least. My standing with God? No. If it *were* possible to do something to affect my standing with God, my standing with God

would increase as I heeded Paul’s exhortation to be subject to superior authorities. “You do not want to be fearing the authority.” If I stopped publishing, I would not have to worry about the authorities coming to my house and treating me to nasty things such as arrest and torture. I just don’t feel like getting tortured—if I can avoid it. I’d rather heed Paul’s advice. I’d go get a job at the grocery store and probably be much happier.

GO AHEAD, DO ME A FAVOR

I think Paul taught this truth to the Romans because many of the Romans were defying the authorities. It could be that Christianity was outlawed at this time. Fine; who wants to be a Christian anyway? Paul and his people weren’t Christians anyway, they were believers. Theirs was not “an official religion.” Let’s say that Paul had to avoid official meetings. He just goes places under the pretense of visiting folks for beer and potato chips and then he talks casually to fellow believers about God. There’s nothing

overt about it; nothing defiant. There's nothing shoving it into the authority's face.

The only overt thing that we do today, as far as people gathering, is organizing conferences like the one in Birmingham, or like the one upcoming in Indianapolis on September 23. I used to sponsor and organize an annual conference in Willard, OH. Because I don't like trouble, hassle and expense, there were times when I had to force myself to go to the trouble, hassle and expense of organizing the Willard conference. I did it for the sake of the edification of the body of Christ, including my own. What if such a thing were illegal? Oh, happy day. What a wonderful excuse it would be to stay home. I would miss the saints, yes, but, I'll see them all soon enough at the snatching away, which no authority on Earth—civil or religious—can outlaw.

LONG, SHARP METAL THINGS

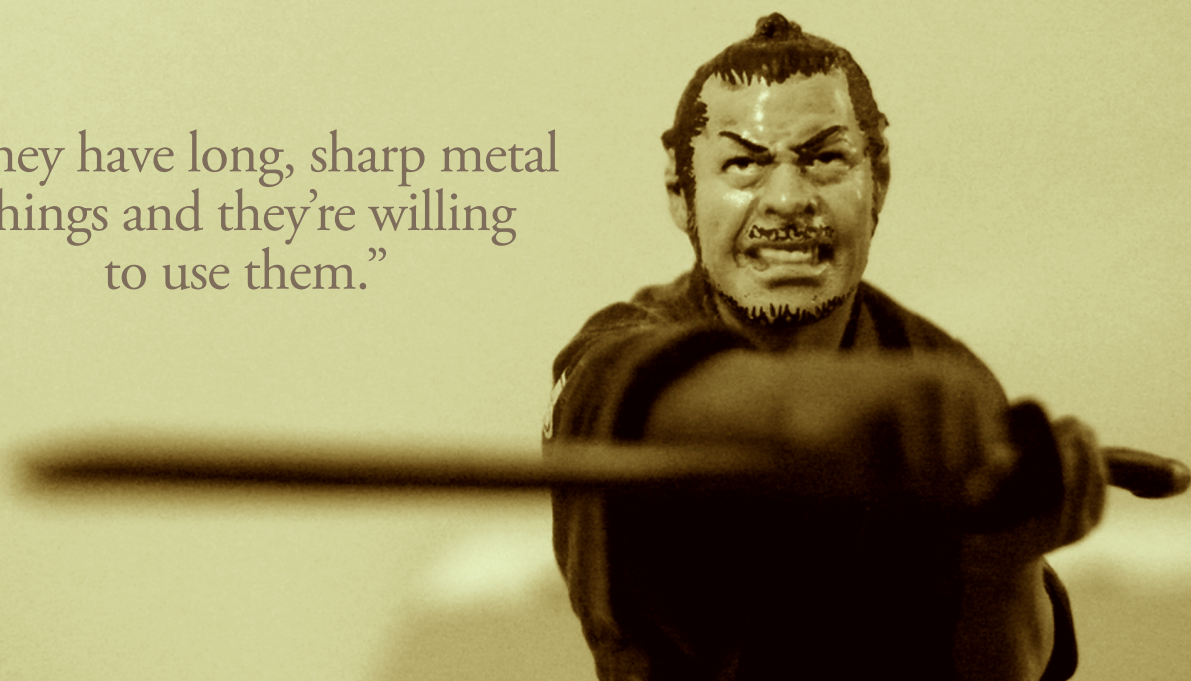
I think that the early Christians who were eaten by lions and generally abused at the Coliseum in Rome, were resisting the authorities. They were saying, possibly through homemade megaphones: "To heck with what the government says, we're going to get together to talk about Jesus, even if we have to dig tunnels under the city of Rome! We're rebels!" We moderns tend to think of these Christians as heroes. I tend to think of them as outlaws.

So would Paul. In Romans 13, Paul tells the believers what to do in order to not be eaten by lions. This is why he says, "Not feignedly is [the authority] wearing the sword." In other words, the authorities are not issuing idle boasts. They have long, sharp metal things and they're willing to use them.

You may reply, "But why would God not want people to get together to discuss their faith?" I don't know. You'll have to ask God that question when you see Him. I don't care why. I don't have to know why. All I have to do is read, grasp and apply two very simply worded, very understandable sentences from Romans 13:1, "There is no authority except under God. Now those which are, have been set under God." The authority's word is God's mandate (Romans 13:2).

Even a baby can understand these sentences. It takes a bushel basket of faith, apparently, to believe them. It takes a real hero in matters of trusting God, apparently, to apply these sentences when the authority is evil and demands what doesn't make sense to us. But I say that if God, for whatever reason, does not want us to be meeting, then He'll inspire the authorities to disallow it and we won't meet. I'm okay with it. It wouldn't be ideal, of course, but I could live with it. I'd look on the bright side. It would save on coffee, gasoline, plane tickets, cheese, crackers, bananas, Jameson whiskey, and all the other things belonging to organizing and conducting conferences.

"They have long, sharp metal things and they're willing to use them."



REBUFFED IN ASIA

Acts 16:5-10—

The ecclesias, indeed, then, were stable in the faith and superabounded in number day by day. Now [Timothy and Paul] passed through Phrygia and the Galatian province, being forbidden by the holy spirit to speak the word in the province of Asia. Yet, coming about Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, and the spirit of Jesus does not let them.

Yet they, passing by Mysia, descended into Troas. And during the night a vision was seen by Paul. A certain man, a Macedonian, was standing and entreating him, and saying, “Cross over into Macedonia! Help us!”

Now as he perceived the vision, we immediately seek to come out to Macedonia, deducing that God has called us to bring the evangel to them.

Why wouldn't the holy spirit want Paul and Timothy to take the evangel into Asia? Doesn't the holy spirit like Asia? Are the people of Asia destined to never be saved? Or is it all a timing thing? Oh, it's a timing thing. We know it's *only* a timing thing because “God is the Savior of all humanity, especially of believers” (1 Timothy 4:10).

“All humanity” includes Asians. It's just a matter of when.

Instead of them going into Asia, God wanted Paul and Timothy passing through Phrygia and the Galatian province. The spirit saying “no” to Asia is God executing a chess move. (God checkmates everyone so easily in this Giant Chess Game of Life because He controls all the pieces on both sides of the board.) Or it's God putting up a new wall in one of those rat mazes. When a wall shows up, the rat has no choice but to turn another way. The rat can spend an hour sniffing the wall, puzzling over it, or cursing it (rats do curse), but it's not going to get the rat anywhere.

For this reason, I can tolerate walls. I do not spend much time sniffing them. Any kind of roadblock is fine with me, ultimately, because it's God saying, “Go another way, Zender.” I *may* try to climb the wall, or go around the roadblock if it's not too imposing. But if I start losing my peace over it, I'll pick up my toys and re-route myself. I'll chalk up the wall or the roadblock as a creative way of God re-directing me.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF WALL-BUILDING

The holy spirit re-directed Timothy and Paul away from Asia and into another region. How did the holy spirit do this? Was it via a giant finger writing on the

wall? Was it a dream? An audible voice? Did Jesus walk into the room and tell Paul and Silas directly? Did a literal wall surround the entire province? I propose to you that the spirit forbade Timothy and Paul by means of an antagonistic authority. I say that the evangelistic duo got wind of a malevolent bureaucracy in the vicinity, primed for a fight, and they “did the math” and knew that it was the same as the spirit of God giving them the stiff-arm. Paul, perceiving that there is no authority except that which has been set by God, looked through the authority and beheld the hand of God. He and Timothy then drafted Plan B.

Not being Christians, Paul and Timothy simply shrugged and went to another place. Knowing God to be the Savior of all humanity, they could leave the timing concerning the conversion of the Asians to God. Paul and Timothy were too smart to risk their necks and the rest of their work by stubbornly disobeying a moronic magistrate disinclined to like them. Christians are simply not this smart.

ONWARD, CHRISTIAN NUTJOBS

A Christian “evangelistic” team would have banged down the doors of Asia with battering rams blessed by the Pope—or Benny Hinn, or somebody with either a basilica or a famous television show to his name. A-waving would



Photo credit: Parralax Corporation; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

go their banners as they sang their battle hymns. They would “claim the Word of God” and take the evangel into Asia in spite of all God-inspired roadblocks. To them, there *are* no God-inspired roadblocks. To them, everything is a personal challenge. *To hell with the civil authorities! To hell with the law of the land! To hell with Romans 13:1!* This would be the Christians’ battle cry.

As they rammed the walls of Asia with their battering tools (festooned with the face of Jesus, Who, Himself, quietly acquiesced to Pilate), they would quote their poster boy, Peter, and their favorite line from Acts, 5:29, “Yet answering, Peter and the apostles say, ‘One must yield to God rather than to men’”; Peter said this, of course, in response to the Sanhedrin saying, “Do we not charge you with a charge not to be teaching in this Name? And lo! you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and are intending to bring on us the blood of this man” (Acts 5:28).

The Christians would be unaware, naturally, that the Peter of Acts, chapter 5, defied the authorities before Paul wrote Romans, chapter 13. Peter acted in accord with the evangel of the Circumcision, and not in accord with that of the Uncircumcision, which did not yet exist. The truth of the conciliation of the world remained a secret snuggled in the bosom of God. At that time, prior to the call of the Pharisee Saul, Jews still held superior spiritual authority over all other nations. And so it was right for Peter to say, “We must obey God, and not human beings.” God had yet to announce our peace with all human beings, or refine the deep truth that He currently operated His governmental will *through* human beings. In other words, the subsequent administration—the administration of the grace of God—had yet to arrive via Paul.

Once God had re-directed Paul (how do you like the Damascus road for a divine re-direction? How’s *that* for a career nudge?) and Paul heralded his special message of grace, conciliation and peace among the nations, then all bets came off the table.

A new administration hit town, in which believers subjected themselves to civil authorities. Their realm no longer belonged on Earth but in Heaven, and so they quit fretting over who ruled what, where. Being sealed by the holy spirit and thus saved for the eons no matter what, they surrendered

many terrestrial concerns, including political elections. Rather than heeding the Circumcision message, namely, that “he who overcomes will eat of the tree of life” (Revelation 2:7), they considered their lives hid together with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). Their identity was now Christ, not their own flesh (Philippians 3:3). They died together with Christ (Romans 6:8), and considered themselves to have been raised with Him in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

No longer needing to overcome *anything* to be saved (Christ overcame *them* with transcendent grace—Ephesians 2:8; 1 Timothy 1:14), they could thus become exemplary citizens under any earthly administration. Being strangers in a strange land, they sang no battle cry, waved no banners to or for the Earth. They could then sit back and watch Earth do its thing while heeding their apostle telling them to be subject to superior authorities. Even Peter eventually nodded Paul’s way by recognizing that a new administration had come and that the kingdom evangel was now an evangel-in-waiting. Thus, he writes in 1 Peter 2:13-15—

You may be subject to every human creation because of the Lord, whether to the king, as a superior, or to governors, as being sent by him for vengeance on evil-doers, yet for the applause of doers of good. For thus it is the will of God, by doing good, to be muzzling the ignorance of imprudent men.

Peter is practically quoting Paul here from Romans 13. Very nice of Peter, I think, to verify what I, Martin Zender, wrote last week concerning the authorities of the context having to be evil. Peter maintains that being subject to the authorities will serve “to be muzzling the ignorance of imprudent men.” Who is in charge of things in this context? Ignorant, imprudent men. Nothing has changed—except that women have joined the fray.

HANG A RIGHT

Paul and Timothy take a clue from the truth of the current administration and they turn right instead of left at the prohibition of the civil authority and head into Phrygia and Galatia. What was in Phrygia and Galatia? Probably Phrygians and Galatians. Then they came into Mysia and tried to go into Bythinia. Who can blame them? I would have done the same thing. “If all else fails, try going into Bythinia,” is what I always say. But what happened? Then it was “the spirit of Jesus” that would not let them in. How did the spirit of Jesus mani-



Photo credit: Connie Roberts; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

fest itself? Probably the same way “the spirit” manifested itself before: in the form of a stubborn authority. Why is it called “the spirit of Jesus” here and only “the spirit” in the previous verse? Because here it is the spirit of Jesus, and in the previous verse it was only “the spirit.”

See how easy it is to believe the Word of God?
Now watch what happens.

MACEDONIA ON THE PHONIA

Paul has a vision in which a man from Macedonia entreats him, saying, “Cross over into Macedonia! Help us!” My educated guess is that the Macedonian authorities had no problem with Paul, or his ilk, or his message. I doubt they even cared. Paul did not appear to be a threat to anyone—unless, or course, his reputation preceded him. This did not happen in Macedonia. Thus, a lot happened in Macedonia. *A lot.*

Going to Macedonia meant that Paul, Timothy and Luke (Luke joined them in Troas; some believe Luke to have been the Macedonian man Paul saw in his vision) sailed from Troas to Neapolis, where they bought ice cream. Then they hopped off on the island of Samothrace. From here, they continued on to the Roman colony of Philippi, which turned into a real bonanza, thanks to Lydia (more on her in a moment), the seller of purple. This area of ancient Philippi is still known as the gateway to Europe. (Until that time, Paul’s message went only as far as Asia.) So thank God for the stubborn authorities, and for the sensitive spirits of Paul and Timothy to believe their own gospel and heed the distinct banging (closed) of large doors leading to Asia. In this way, the gospel comes to Europe.

The trio met Lydia and other devout Philippian women by the river praying (Acts 16:16–18). This was a Pure Thing of God—as much of a Pure Thing of God as the ruling powers of Asia and Bithynia rebuffing them. Lydia was a seller of purple, probably a wealthy woman, and rumor has it that she bankrolled Paul’s little adventures through the European continent. The Philippians were especially good to Paul, financially.

In addition to this, in Philippi Paul delivered the fortune-telling slave girl from demonic possession, resulting in Paul and Silas’ getting beaten with rods and tossed into jail (Acts 16:16–24). This seems to be an entry into the “negative” column, but the jailer and his household end up receiving Paul’s message and becoming members of the body of Christ. (Acts 16:29–34). This encounter gave us the famous saying, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be being saved” (Acts 16:31). Not



only this, but Paul brings down the house, figuratively speaking, at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16–34), resulting in the memorable line, “God does not dwell in temples built by human hands” (Acts 17:24).

Paul planted several churches in Macedonian cities. You have probably heard of Philippi (Acts 16:12), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1), and Corinth (Acts 18:1–11).

When God closes a door, He opens a window. When He opens a window, jump through it. But first you must be aware that a door has closed. Listen for a loud bang. That will be the door closing. It comes in many forms, including lousy governments and corrupt rulers.

Without forsaking your calling, turn into the direction of less imposing resistance; you will find some lower hanging fruit there.

Pluck and eat it. It’s tasty. —MZ

(Next week: “God’s Servant For Your Good.”)

Produced by Martin Zender/www.martinzender.com
© 2017 by Martin Zender/Published by Starke & Hartmann, Inc.
email: mztender@martinzender.com