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How Can Romans 13:3 Be True When Some Governments Persecute Christians?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how Romans 13:3 can be true when some governments imprison and kill Christians and whether it's better for high schoolers to go to a Christian school with hypocritical Christians or a public school where people reinforce an ungodly worldview.

* How can Romans 13:3 be true when some governments imprison and kill Christians?

* Is it better for high schoolers to go to a Christian school where hypocritical Christians are hurting their walk with the Lord or to go to a public school where people will reinforce an ungodly worldview?

Transcript

[music] [ding] Welcome to another episode of the hashtag #straskpodcast with Amy Hall and Greg Cokol. Howdy. Howdy, Craig.

It's funny you say "Howdy" because our first question comes from Henry David How. Oh, okay. I thought you were going to say it comes from a guy named duty because then howdy duty.

Okay. All right. Here's his question.

How can Romans 13 be true when some governments imprison or kill people because they are Christians? Well, this is a very timely question. I'm going to turn to it. But this is not unqualified.

Romans 13, 2 says, and 13. 13, 3. 3. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same.

For it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid for it does not bear the sword for nothing. For it is a minister of God and a vendor who brings wrath

on the one who practices evil.

And what we have here in this passage is an identification of an institution that God is responsible for putting into place for a particular purpose. Okay. And I'm just going to give a parallel.

Genesis chapter three, chapter two, for this cause of man shall leave his mother and his father and be joined to his wife. And the two become one flesh. And then when Jesus says what God has joined together, let no man separate Matthew 19.

So that's his application of this institution, God ordained for a purpose as it touches the question of divorce. All right. Well, just because God ordained something for a purpose doesn't mean that human beings can't corrupt the purpose that God ordained it for.

It's really clear in this passage that God ordained government for the purpose of punishing evil and promoting good. The minute a government is no longer punishing evil and promoting good, but doing the opposite, then it is not doing the thing that God ordained it to do. And therefore, at least in some measure, it loses its authority.

Notice that God says we should obey the governments because they are a minister of God for good. But what if the obeying the government causes is an example of us doing evil or the government is doing evil instead of punishing evil. Well, that undermines its legitimacy even before God.

This passage is identifying the purpose that God ordained governments and just like he ordained marriage. But there are exceptions to the sanctity of marriage. Jesus himself says when there's adultery, for example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, when there is an abandonment by a non-Christian spouse, we live in a fallen world.

So this is not a kind of absolute without qualification. Now, I have a great small book at home that I've read and I have recommended it. The problem is it's got a difficult title because it was written a long time.

Well, the book is recent, recent, but it was about something that happened hundreds of years ago. Christians who got together to figure out how these passages apply to us dealing with wicked governments. All right.

And the title has to do with it's called The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates, I think is the title. That sounds right. Yeah.

The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates. And this is in some recent thing. This is hundreds of years old where really smart Christians had a deal with wicked governments and figure out what their obligation before God was given the Scripture.

Okay. And what they said is when it comes to wicked governments, they are operating

outside of their God-ordained responsibility. And therefore, they don't have the God-ordained authority that they would have if they were doing what they're supposed to do.

Okay. Now, I'm just giving a general concept here and working out the details are more difficult. And this is one of the things that was done by this particular counsel in working out the concept of the authority of the lesser magistrate.

Now, an example of this, whether people agree with the politics of it or not is entirely incidental. I'm just giving a modern example. During the COVID crisis, a lot of people thought the federal government overstepped its bounds in terms of human liberty, personal liberty.

Okay. And the governor of the state of Florida, Ron DeSantis, stepped in. And he said, I am protecting my people from the president of the United States.

In other words, he's asserting his lesser authority as a state governor to oppose the greater authority that, in his view, was acting inappropriately. And that would be the federal government. And so the state government has some signal ought to have, it seems, supposed to have some significant amount of autonomy as a sovereign state.

And even though they were under the federal government in certain ways, but it's the lesser authority, the governor of the state of Florida, was opposing the greater authority who is doing wrong in his view. Now, whether he's right or wrong on his judgment, excuse me, is a different question, but this was an example of the lesser authority predominating here or taken action against the so-called greater authority because the greater authority was wrong. And the lesser authority steps in.

Okay. You have lesser authorities on lots of different levels that was like state versus federal, but you also have local versus federal. And you have a parental authority versus government authority.

So there are various levels of types of authority that God has ordained. He's the authority of the government. He's ordained the authority of the church.

He's ordained the authority of parents over their children. Okay. These are all levels of authority at sometimes their conflict.

And so what ends up happening is you don't always obey the greater authority. You obey the greater good because if you always obey the greater authority, then despotic governments would rule with God's approval. And when I say rule with God's approval, I mean the things that they are doing in their rule would be approved by God since they're the greater authority.

This is the divine right of kings kind of thing. And this was part of what was being opposed by the doctrine of the lesser magistrate. One other thing I want to add here is

when we are told to obey the government, all right here, rulers are not a cause for fear for good behavior.

I mean, when I read this, you realize, especially now, wait a minute, rulers are a fear for good behavior because people who are doing good things are being punished by rulers right now. Okay. And the only for evil behavior, but wait a minute, all kinds of evil behaviors are being punished.

It's being promoted. Okay. So that ought to be enough to signal Christians that this verse is not applicable in the way that God attended it because the circumstances God intended it for has changed.

But there's another detail here. The authority that are in place, who are the authorities? Well, we got a, we got a state government. We got local community to government.

We have a state, we have a state government legislature and governor. We have a federal government. Well, wait a minute, we also have, wait, these people don't have authority in our system all on their own.

They swear a pledge when they take office and the pledge is to preserve and protect the constitution of the United States. So the authority that is above all of the rest of these authorities is a written document and a written document that is also secured by a declaration of independence. And that's all part of the legal system.

So then the question becomes, what happens when you have a written document that is a superior authority to those authorities over us and the authorities over us are not obeying that? What are we supposed to do? Obeyed the, obey the federal government when the federal government is not obeying the constitution? The authority over us and everybody is the constitution. So if I'm committed to upholding the constitution and the declaration that goes with it, then I am obeying the government that has been established to control those government institutions that fall under its authority. So this is another detail here.

The government, the rulers are not just one individual, but we have levels of authority and sometimes those levels of authority contradict each other. So then which one Paul are we to obey? In his case, they didn't have all of those levels. We have them now.

But if I say no to the federal government and yes to the constitution, I'm still the constitution secured for my good. When the government is acting for my harm, then I'm still obeying the authority that's over me, the one that's over the others that seem to be disobeying it. So what I'm trying to avoid is a naive reading of this passage.

Well, this is what the government or somebody in the government said, I got to do. Which government? You know, there's all kinds of government now. You have all kinds of unelective officials that are saying we got to do certain things that they say we got to do.

Well, they've got authority. Well, wait a minute, if they're exceeding their authority, then they don't have appropriate authority. So anyway, what I think this passage does do is helps us to understand that there is an institution that governs people that God has placed in position for a particular purpose, which is a good purpose.

When that purpose is violated, then the authority of the violators under God seems to be to be in question as well. That's really helpful, Greg. And I just want to say a few things generally about authority because I do think this passage is talking very generally about authorities created by God because the Bible is very clear that we are to submit to authorities, that God has created a system where there are hierarchies, there are people in charge in the family, in the church, in the state, in all these different places.

Now, it is extremely countercultural to say, to talk about submission as something that's beautiful and good. That's not something. Well, I almost want to say it's not something we really like now, but considering the fact that almost everyone of the pistons in the New Testament will talk about submitting to authorities, it's obviously always been a problem with human beings.

We have never wanted to do that. And so the idea here in this chapter is that God created governing authorities. He created this system, not necessarily he wants totalitarian states or anything like that, but he's created authority.

He's created state authority, like all the authorities mentioned. He's created that for our good, for order, for the sake of thriving in any sort of community. And we would do well as Christians to submit to those authorities in the way when God has, you know, when they're acting for good, that is what we need to do.

And that's not something that's celebrated in our culture. So just the mere fact that you, that we as Christians want to submit to the various hierarchies and authorities, that's something we have to be told to do. Yeah, it's very important.

And I would say because of the strong emphasis that God does place on these things throughout the New Testament, especially, we need to be very careful. And you mentioned some of the things we need to consider as we're, as we're fault, what, you know, what authority we're following. But as Christians, we need to be very, very careful about going against authority.

It is a dangerous thing. And we'd better be sure about what we're doing. But we have examples, think about the apostles.

They were told not to speak in the name of Jesus, and they did it. So we have examples of the people who are following Jesus, not doing what they were told by the authority. So like you said, Greg, working all this out, I think we're, we're going to disagree somewhat among Christians.

And we've seen a lot of that over the last couple of years. So have grace for people, be careful about going against authority, but follow Jesus as best you can, doing what is right and, and have grace for other Christians, because it's not easy to figure out every time. Right.

Sometimes though it seems to me obvious, I'll give you one example that is current. I don't know if this has been signed into law yet or not, but it's a fatal complete in the state of California. Okay.

Because it's a, it's a Democrats control the state. And so whatever they decide, the mayor, the governor is going to sign off. And they made a big deal about this in recent times.

But this is essentially a kidnapping law, the state can kidnap your child. That is, and it doesn't matter. You could be your child can be from another state.

But if the child, believe it has a gender dysphoria and the parents of the minor are not supportive of their new gender identity, then they can flee to the state of California and the California will give them protective custody away from their parents so that they don't have to go back to their own parents and the state will take care of them and give them what they want, even though they're minors. So this, it is properly, in my view, properly characterized as a kidnapping law, the state can kidnap now in this particular case, the kids are approving, but these are minors that are being taken away from the parents. And, and they, they, the parents, you know, I don't know what the ultimate legal recourse is going to be for other states, but certainly not in the state of California, there's no legal recourse because this is a California law.

And they've been promoting this around the country telling people, you know, this is what we're doing. So this is, to me, an obvious example of the state completely overstepping their bounds and doing something that is harmful for the child because what these children want is they want medical attention that will cause them to change their physical bodies. And sometimes in many cases get surgery to match their gender identity, what's called the gender identity.

So this is, the state is going to prove of a minor mutilating their body against the parents desires. Is this the state acting for the good and not for the evil? No, this is state acting for the evil and not for the good. So I use that as an example, because it's current.

And I don't think there's many people, no matter how strongly they're committed to a very rigid and wooden understanding of this passage in Romans 13, I think those people are still going to say, wait a minute, this is over the top. They're not going to say, well, my kids have gender problems. We're not going to support it, but we're just going to let the state take them away.

And yeah, we got to obey Romans 13. I don't think that's going to be their attitude. And like I said, there are examples in the Bible, like Daniel, Daniel refused, or Daniel kept praying even though it was illegal.

And he got to that's what got him in the lion's den. And Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Into the bed we go.

Yeah. And you also the, the midwives for the Hebrews. It's just the book of Exodus.

Every time we're doing this, I think we need to do it with fear and trembling because we need to understand how important the idea of authority is to God, that it's for our good. And so if we're going to go against it, it's again, fear and trembling. But like you said, sometimes it is clear.

Well, it is. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did everything he could to oppose, to stand up publicly for the good and the right and the appropriate. And it finally got to a point where he was complicit in a, in an enterprise to take the life of the ruler, Adolf Hitler in that particular case.

So for which he lost his own life. Now maybe they're mixed. Maybe there's a mixed bag as far as what people thought he did.

But if you read the rise and fall, it changes your opinion immensely, you know, when you see the big picture, if you were opposed to that. Let's go to a question from Ellie. What do you think is better for high schoolers going to a Christian school where hypocritical Christians are constantly letting them down and hurting their walk with the Lord or going to a public school with people who will reinforce an ungodly worldview? That is a really tough question.

And, and it's very personal to me because I understand the first characterization because to some degree of that happened to one of my daughters and really put her off on Christianity. Now we didn't know that was what was going on. And this made it difficult for us to do anything about it.

But nitty-bitty did this damage. So I'm very sympathetic to this concern. I think I would still, I think I would, you know, with everything, I still would go with the private school option because you have more opportunity to manage and control that, at least ostensibly there's a philosophic doctrinal convictions that you as a parent would share with the administration.

When you have, when you have the, you know, a secular school, you don't have anything like that. Nobody's on your side there. And if it's one thing to get your feelings hurt by Christians, that's terrible, who should be acting differently.

Okay. But it's another thing when you're in an exact opposite circumstance where you're

going to be punished by us unless you conform to our politically correct view, which is made to sound very attractive and appealing. You know, being a good Christian doesn't sound appealing to somebody whose flesh wants to go the other direction.

Your young person or a teenager, whatever. The good doesn't seem good at that time. The bad seems good.

And so when you're put in a position where you're encouraged to the bad, which feels good at the moment, and everybody's encouraged you and they're going to punish you one way or another for not going along with the crowd. I think that's a much more dangerous circumstance. It would be better if you, well, if you know this school is hypocritical and the students are hypocritical, find a different school if you're able to.

If you're not, stay on top of things. I think you'll always have this problem because a lot of times you have parents who are Christians, but the children aren't Christians. That can easily happen.

In either case, your child will be with people who aren't Christians. And that's actually not the worst thing in the world, because they can learn how to deal with them. As long as you're explaining to them the difference between someone who's following Jesus and someone who goes to church.

I mean, those are two different things. And so you can help your child understand. And this didn't occur to me.

Greg when I was putting these questions together, but it also occurs to me at the Christian school, and you mentioned something about this, the authorities there are authorities you can trust. So you have that sense of order. You have that ability for your child to submit to them, to appeal to them, all that sort of thing, even if the people underneath them are not behaving it in a good way.

There's there will be that order there. Whereas in a public school, there's not that order there. So now you have complete chaos.

It's quite the opposite. Yeah. The order is meant to enforce a whole different set of values, especially now.

So in terms of the good, now you're in a situation where it's total chaos. It's not just that the people around you who are subject to the authorities are in chaos. It's the entire system.

And now you have injustices happening, and you have, well, you're going to have that anywhere because we're a fallen world, but it's it will be so much worse, I think, in the public school. Now, if your if your kid is really good at doing apologetics and all that, I mean, you can weigh all these things. But I think just in terms of the atmosphere and the

environment, you're better off going with the Christian school that's teaching truth.

Well, Greg, it's 22 minutes into the show already. All right, Henry and Ellie, we appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, send it to us on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk.

Or you can go to our website, just go to our hashtag #STRAskPodcast page and you'll find a link there. You can send us a question through that link and we will consider your question for the show. We look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.

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