

Chapter 4

The Ministers of God Are Identified as a Terror to Evil

Not only does the Apostle Paul identify the rulers he's writing about in Romans 13 as [authorities rather than powers](#) and as [ministers of God](#), he also distinguishes them as a terror to the wicked.

For rulers *are* ... a terror ... to the evil ... if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he *is* the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. (Romans 13:3-4)

Paul is not describing what such a government is *supposed* to be but instead what it *is*. This cannot be said about secular government. One can only wish that secular government would occasionally fulfill the description provided by Paul. Only governments based upon Yahweh's criminal justice system and executing His civil judgments upon the wicked will be a consistent terror to evil.

Revenger

This concept is borne out in the word "revenger" in Verse 4. It is translated from the Greek *ekdikos* meaning "carrying justice out,"¹ or executing righteousness. Righteousness originates from only one source:

...Only in Yahweh are righteousness and strength. (Isaiah 45:24)

Righteous art thou, O Yahweh, and upright are thy judgments. (Psalm 119:137)

The government described by Paul executes the righteousness of God by adjudicating *His* just civil sanctions upon the wicked. Solomon made it clear only the righteous can consistently carry out God's justice:

Evil men understand not judgment [justice, NASB]: but they that seek Yahweh understand all things. (Proverbs 28:5)

Solomon also commented upon the results of righteous leadership:

When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn. (Proverbs 29:2)

The righteous need not fear such godly authorities. The 1st-century Christians were terrorized by Nero. Consequently, neither he, nor any comparable secular ruler today, fits Paul's description. Ministers of God are a terror to *only* the wicked.

Kakos

The Greek word *kakos*, translated "evil" in Verses 3 and 4, is the same word Paul contrasts with Yahweh's law earlier in Romans:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing.... For the good that I would I do not: but the evil [*kakos*] which I would not, that I do. ...it is ... sin that dwelleth in me. ...when I would do good, evil [*kakos*] is present with me. [But] I delight in the law of God... (Romans 7:18-22)

Kakos is evil because it's a violation of Yahweh's law:

Nay, I had not known sin [evil], but by the law.... (Romans 7:7)

Evil is evil because God determines it is so. Man, on the other hand, is known for doing what is right in his own eyes,² which culminates in his calling evil good and good evil.³ Consequently, man makes legal what God has made unlawful, just as he makes illegal what God has determined lawful. This ultimately results in Christians being persecuted for observing Yahweh's law over the conflicting edicts of secular government:

[W]hen [after imprisoning the Apostles] they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name?... Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:27-29)

In 1643, Pastor Samuel Rutherford wrote *Lex, Rex, or the Law and the Prince* in which he commented on Romans 13:3-4:

The ruler, as the ruler, and the nature and intrinsical end of the office is, that he bear God's sword as an avenger to execute wrath on him that doth evil, and so cannot be resisted without sin. But the man who is the ruler, and commandeth things unlawful, and killeth the innocent, carrieth the ... sword to execute, not the righteous judgment of the Lord upon the ill-doer, but his own private revenge upon him that doth well; therefore, the man may be resisted....⁴

Few preachers today see as clearly as Pastor Jonathan Mayhew did when he commented on verse 4:

If rulers are a terror to good works, and not to the evil; if they are not ministers for good to society, but for evil and distress, by violence and oppression; if they execute wrath upon sober, peaceable persons, who do their duty as members of society, and suffer rich and honorable knaves to escape with impunity; if, instead of attending continually upon the good work of advancing the public welfare, they attend continually upon the gratification of their own lust and pride and ambition, to the destruction of the public welfare; if this be the case, it is plain that the apostle's argument for submission does not reach them; they are not the same, but different persons from those whom he characterizes, and who must be obeyed, according to his reasoning.⁵

Paul again contrasts *kakos* with Yahweh's law in the three verses immediately following our text:

[H]e that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill [*kakos*] to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Only God defines who and what is evil. Any attempt by man to do what only God can do amounts to the same sin Adam and Eve committed in the garden: a usurpation of Yahweh's place as God. What does this say about secular government, which provides its own definitions for what constitutes evil? What does this say about those who contend Paul is promoting submission to such governments?

How does *God* define what is evil?

Whosoever committeth sin [or, doeth evil] transgresseth also the law: for sin [evil] is the transgression of the law. (1 John 3:4)

The evildoers in Romans 13:3-4 are violators of God's moral law, not man's surrogate edicts. Thus, the avenger who executes the wrath of God (i.e., Yahweh's prescribed civil sanctions upon evildoers) is not just any Tom, Dick, or Harry claiming power over others and defining evil and its judgment on his own terms. Instead, the avenger is a God-ordained authority, a judge like those depicted in Exodus 18:

Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers.... And let them judge the people at all seasons.... (Exodus 18:21-22)

Deterrent to Evil

Yahweh's civil sanctions are not only intended to chasten convicted lawbreakers, but also to deter those whose predisposition to evil would otherwise go unchecked:

Smite a scorner, and the simple [naive, NASB] will beware.... (Proverbs 19:25)

The deterrent effect upon the wicked, which is explicit in Paul's phrase "be afraid" in Verse 3, is not unique to Paul, as it would be if he were advocating the same response for the same reason toward a secular government. As with nearly everything Paul wrote, Verses 3 and 4 were inspired by God's law:

Thou shalt not consent unto him [one who proselytized for a god other than Yahweh] ... neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: But thou shalt surely kill him.... *And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more any such wickedness as this is among you.* (Deuteronomy 13:8-11)

And the man that ... will not hearken unto ... the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. *And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.* (Deuteronomy 17:12-13)

[I]f the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. *And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you.* And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (Deuteronomy 19:18-21)⁶

The principle objective of God's civil judgments under the jurisdiction of God-ordained authorities is to elicit fear in the general population, who might otherwise be inclined to act wickedly. *This is precisely Paul's point.*

According to Matthew 7:13-14,⁷ the majority of the general population are in the broad way leading to destruction and are therefore not inherently inclined toward living their lives according to the ethics of the small-gate and narrow-way folks. Consequently, they often need external stimulus according to live their lives by God's law. Thus, God's civil judgments:

[W]e know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the law is ... made for ... the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. (1 Timothy 1:8-11)

One cannot read Paul's epistles without being struck by his repeated appeals to Yahweh's law as the authority for his statements. Romans 13:3-4 is no exception. To apply these verses to secular government is to deny the connection between what Paul wrote and Yahweh's law as his authority.

Reason to Fear

The righteous do not need to fear God-ordained authorities. However, they often need to fear those who are mere powers established by God for the judgment of wicked nations. The righteous remnant often suffers with the wicked at such times. It would seem this was the motivation for Habakkuk's prayer:

O Yahweh, ... in wrath remember mercy. (Habakkuk 3:2)

Because such powers do not meet Paul's criteria and are, in fact, often the opposite, they cannot be the civil leaders he's endorsing. Such powers are never lauded as God's righteous ministers but are instead condemned by God:

He that justifieth the wicked, and that condemmeth the just, even they both are an abomination to Yahweh. (Proverbs 17:15)

Those who teach Romans 13 is about secular government would have you believe that those who are an abomination to Yahweh are, in fact, the ministers of God to whom Paul refers.

Justifying the wicked and condemning the just is the inevitability of secular government. Such governments are not to be tolerated by those who serve the King of kings. They are, instead, to be exposed:

And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. (Ephesians 5:11)

To what end? That God's righteous foundations under the authority of Christ's kingship might be restored. In other words, that evil government might be replaced with good government, under the jurisdiction of such godly authorities as depicted by Paul. *Who wouldn't want such a government?* And yet Christians are often tragically at the forefront in opposing biblical government.⁸

Silence

Because Romans 13:3 clearly depicts a biblical government that *is* a terror to evil, Verse 3 is usually met with silence by those who claim Romans 13 is about secular government. Silence is pretty much their only option because they know secular government seldom fits Paul's description of "terrorizing the wicked."

Secular rulers have rejected Yahweh's sovereignty and thus His law, including His civil sanctions. It is, therefore, impossible to conclude such governments are a terror to the wicked, as determined by *the very laws* spurned by such governments.

Paul's "minister[s] of God," who are a terror to evil, are God-ordained authorities responsible for enacting Yahweh's righteous judgments upon the wicked.

1. James Strong, *ekdikos*, "Greek Dictionary of the New Testament," *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990) p. 26.

2. "In those days ... every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25)

3. "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20)

4. Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex, or The Law and the Prince* (Originally printed in London for John Field, October 7, 1644) (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982) p. 145.

5. Jonathan Mayhew, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers," quoted by John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Political Sermons of the Period of 1776* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1970) pp. 70-71.

6. See also Deuteronomy 21:19-21.

7. "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)

8. For more on how Yahweh's moral law applies and should be implemented today, see [Law and Kingdom: Their Relevance Under the New Covenant](#).

See also [A Biblical Constitution: A Scriptural Replacement for Secular Government](#).

See also series of ten online books on each of the Ten Commandments and their respective statutes, and judgments, beginning with [Thou shalt have no other gods before me](#).