

Episode 249

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. Joining me today is Jeff, the Managing Editor of BibleRef.com, and Kevin, the Managing Editor for GotQuestions.org. Today we're going to be discussing everyone's favorite topic, and this episode will go live around the time of somewhere close to April 15th, where Americans—I don't know when people in other countries pay their taxes, but when Americans at least have to file and usually pay their taxes. I think the three of us were very unanimous in the sense that no one likes paying taxes. By looking at God's Word, the message is very clear. The Bible is very consistent on submitting to the government and specifically on paying taxes.

Shea Houdmann

So I thought I'd start us off with what I think is probably the clearest passage in Scripture, and that's in Romans chapter 13, verses 1 to 7. I'm going to read that for you. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval. For he is God's servant for your good, but if you do wrong, be afraid. For he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is a servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this, you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Shea Houdmann

So I don't see a clearer passage in Scripture than this one. The only explanation I first approached some people about why this doesn't apply is like, well, that doesn't take into account how wicked and corrupt our government is today. So let me give you a reminder that when Paul wrote the book of Romans, the Roman emperor Nero, potentially the most evil of all the Roman emperors was the person who was in authority. So clearly a lot of the money that was being paid in taxes was going towards anti-God, anti-Christian, the most evil things imaginable. So Paul was writing that in this

context, even in that context, even when the government is hopelessly corrupt, we are still to pay taxes. So Jeff, in your study of this issue, what are some of the things that stuck in your mind and what are some of just the questions you've seen over the years that got questions about this issue?

Jeff Laird

Well, it's definitely one of those uncomfortable situations. And it's a place where you sort of where the rubber hits the road on what am I going to obey? And when am I going to come up with excuses to not obey?

Because, yeah, it would be as a Christian, it would be sort of nice, I guess, to have some built in excuse to say, nope, I don't have to do that. See, and there's reasons in the Bible for us to legitimately disobey government at times. So nothing that Paul is saying or anyone else is saying in the Bible is that we're supposed to give absolute obedience unquestioningly and immediately to the earthly government.

Jeff Laird

What it's saying is, and that passage in Romans basically is telling us that human government exists for a reason. And that reason, generally speaking, is supposed to be to restrain evil. And we can get into all the political discussions of what government should do, shouldn't do, how much is too much, you know, when is it not enough? But from a spiritual standpoint, the core purpose of government is protecting people from evil. And for that reason alone, it makes sense that we cooperate on some level with what government is doing. So that's why instead of the Bible telling us, resist your leaders at every turn, do everything you can to interfere, don't ever do anything you don't like. It tells us things like pray for our leaders so that we can live quiet lives. In other words, we pray for leaders so that they'll do the right thing. So they'll follow what God wants, but also so that they'll leave us alone so that we can pursue our faith the way we want to.

Jeff Laird

That doesn't mean we don't have responsibilities. Bible also talks about how God is sometimes not happy with the leaders that we put in office when we have a choice. Hosea 8 talks about this. Honestly, every civilization has some level of responsibility for who they allow to be leaders. Even the oppressed multitudes of an ancient empire, in theory, if they're not all rising up together to fight against that person, then to some extent that's the leadership that they're accepting. So God is not always happy with what we do with leaders. So we should take advantage of all the things he gives us, all the freedoms he gives us to change things if we think they're not right. So believers are not obligated to say, well, I'm supposed to submit to government. That means I

can never complain about my taxes to the government and I can never work to change them.

Jeff Laird

That's exactly the opposite. If we think that there's something that is unfair or immoral or unwise, there's nothing in scripture that says we can't use all the tools that we have at our disposal. And for people here in the United States, that means we can talk, we can protest, we can write letters, we can vote, which is awfully important. All of those things are fine. So it's perfectly fine for a Christian to say, I don't think that the taxes I'm paying are right or I don't like where they're going or anything else like that and working to change that. What we can't do as believers is say the whole concept of paying taxes, I'm just not going to do. I refuse to do that.

Jeff Laird

Obviously, there's some things that our taxes go to that we would rather that they not. But where we find a lot of the counterbalance in that, as you were saying, Shea, is when we think about the context of what Paul was talking about. The Roman Empire was doing an awful lot of things with the taxes they were collecting that was pretty bad. But then they were also serving the civic things that they were supposed to. And Paul doesn't ask us to try to shave down those fine lines. He basically just says, look, government has a general purpose. Give to people what is owed.

Jeff Laird

And a reminder to people that Paul was one of those guys who would stick up for his legal rights, places in the book of Acts where he stands up for what his legal rights as a Roman citizen are in order to keep himself out of other trouble or things he doesn't want.

Jeff Laird

So most of the issue of taxes just comes down to personal politics, not necessarily the biblical concepts. So when we disagree on this, we just have to remember that as believers, as long as we're on board with the idea that we kind of have to pay taxes, then the debates about what are we spending it on? What are we not spending it on? Or is it too much or not enough is OK, as long as we know that's not really a biblical discussion.

Kevin Stone

Why do I pay my taxes? Well, I'm compelled by conscience sake. The government says I need to, and Scripture actually backs that up. Scripture says, Shea read Romans 13, pay your taxes. And no matter how many times I read through that passage in Romans 13, no matter how many different translations I go to, it still says taxes and it still says revenue. It also says honor and respect, which I struggle with as well. Not only paying the taxes,

but showing that honor and respect for government officials that I don't always see eye to eye with. But that is where we are as believers. We are to be good citizens. We are to pay our taxes and we're to give honor to whom honor is due. And it's a good thing for us to keep in mind.

Kevin Stone

The issue came up in Jesus' day. And in Jesus' day, the Jews were being taxed quite heavily. I mean, the Romans had all kinds of taxes that they levied against the people of Israel. They had a land tax, a grain tax, an oil tax, a wine tax. They had taxes on goods that are being transported through harbors, across piers, gates, entrances into cities. So if you wanted to come into some area with that wagon load of stuff, you got to pay taxes on it. They had a 1% wage tax. They had a one denarius poll tax and tax on top of tax. And the Jews hated paying these taxes because they were, in a sense, funding their own oppressors. See, the Jews weren't even citizens of Rome. They were subjects of Rome. They saw Rome as the oppressor. That's exactly what the Romans were. They were oppressors of the Jews. And yet the Jews still had to pay all these taxes. Helps to explain why tax collectors were, as a group, hated in the Jewish culture and why Jesus talked about them so often. And even called one of them, Levi, Matthew, to be one of his disciples.

Kevin Stone

Well, one day some Pharisees come to Jesus with a test question. Tell us, what is your opinion? This is Matthew chapter 22. What's your opinion, Jesus? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? And so Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and he calls them hypocrites. And he says, why are you trying to trap me? Bring me a denarius. And so they do. They dig in their pockets. They give him a denarius. And he takes that coin. And I'm reading between the lines here, but I'd like to think that he would hold it up to them. Say, whose image is this? Whose inscription is this? Whose name is here? And of course they say, well, that's Caesar's likeness. That's his image. And that's Caesar's name that is stamped on that coin. And so Jesus said then, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, give to God what is God's.

Kevin Stone

What a brilliant response from our Lord to these Pharisees who are trying to entrap him. What belongs to Caesar, you can go ahead and give to him. And it's got his picture on it. It's got his name on it. Rome minted these coins. Go ahead and give them back to Rome if that's what they require. But then remember this, Jesus said, you need to be giving God what belongs to God. And where is God's image and likeness stamped? That is on the human soul. We are created in the image and likeness of God. So Jesus says, hey, this coin, it's got the image of Caesar, give it back to him. But you, on the

other hand, you bear the image of God. You belong to God. Make sure you're giving of yourself to God. You belong to him.

Kevin Stone

And of course, Jesus, in saying this and teaching that, yeah, you go ahead and pay your taxes, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. He makes no distinction between the good use of tax money and the wrong use of tax money. Which was unfair or fair in its collection or whatever. He simply says, give to government what is due to the government. Give to God what is due to God. This, he says, not even to citizens of Rome, but to the subjects of Rome, who I'm sure complained all the way.

Shea Houdmann

And there are, of course, other passages, I'm blanking on the reference right now, but the passage where they asked Jesus, are you going to pay the temple tax? And he says, well, aren't sons, referring to himself like exempt? He said, but so that we don't offend Peter, go throw out a line in the river and catch a fish, and the first fish will have a coin in his mouth that'll pay the tax for both of us. So there's an example of Jesus specifically paying a tax that he technically was exempt from.

Shea Houdmann

So now, again, there's nothing in the Bible that exempts us from paying taxes, even when we see the government using the money foolishly or even using the money for ungodly purposes. And that's what I think I hear most often is like, Jeff, you talked about the excuse that people will use for not paying. I'm not going to give to the government because some of it goes to fund abortions or some of it goes to fund this or that. It's like, yeah, that's true. But again, the scripture doesn't give us caveat or an out for paying taxes, or I've literally met people who they'll go through and figure out, okay, last year, the US government spent whatever trillion dollars on everything. And of that, I say about 60% of what they're spending is actually what they're supposed to. So I'm only going to give them 60% of what they say. And it's one that's not biblical. It's give taxes who taxes are due. And the government's the one who determines what taxes are due. And you're not going to get away with it. Eventually, the government's going to come after you and you're going to be paying more.

Shea Houdmann

With that said, I understand the attitude. I just don't find it to be biblical. I don't find anything in scripture that gives us the right to determine how much taxes we should pay. And that's never been the case really anywhere in human history. Yes, the government gives us lots of exemptions and rebates and refunds and way to lower our tax burden. And we should avail ourselves

of every legal opportunity to reduce our tax burden. But in terms of us deciding how much we should give based on what we think of the government, that's not biblical. And that definitely doesn't work in any sort of governmental system.

Kevin Stone

I think what helps to fight that mentality is to consider the end of our responsibility and then the beginning of somebody else's responsibility. So my responsibility is to pay the taxes. That's what scripture clearly teaches. But then once I've paid, I'm no longer responsible for how that money is used. To a certain extent, I'm speaking generally here. But after that, the people are going to take that money. Government takes that money and uses it for various purposes. And that responsibility falls on them. They will answer for that. I'm going to answer for whether or not I was a good citizen and paid my taxes according to the law. And then after that, somebody else is going to answer for how that money was spent. Of course, living in America, we have the right to vote. We have the right to lobby and to change laws. So there is a certain responsibility we have there. But just generally speaking, if we can be discerning enough to find that demarcation, my responsibility ends and somebody else's responsibility begins.

Jeff Laird

It's also good to remember that there's an element of the a little bit of the turn the other cheek going on with a little bit of this, in the sense that, for example, when Paul says, pray for leaders so we can live quiet lives and so that they'll be more godly. And then he's saying, give to those who are owed honor, give them honor, taxes, revenue, etc., etc. There's a lot of things in the Christian life where we as believers have to remember that we've got greater responsibilities and greater purposes than our creature comforts and even some of the things that we think are important. And some of these things are important. But at the same time, we often find that striving and struggling for those little things tends to distract and it doesn't tend to get us anywhere. And a lot of times it dilutes what we're trying to talk to people about when it comes to more important things.

Jeff Laird

So, for example, with taxes, if Christians were constantly known for bickering with and arguing with and defying the government over things like taxes, or we kept taking that further and saying, I'm not going to follow those speed limits because I'm a believer in Jesus. And I think this, I'm not going to listen to what you say about how I maintain my car. I'm not going to listen to what you say about when I play my music. At some point in time, what you start to do is people start to identify you more as somebody who's really obsessed

with what they want to get when they want to get it and not with living in a way that shows people the love of God and the love of Christ. And that's not a blanket reason for us to just be doormats, but it's a reason to remember that a lot of times as believers, our default response to some things is supposed to be to say, let's set our priorities. So I could argue with and fight with the government about this tax thing, but in general, I just don't have a good reason to. In fact, God tells me I'm not supposed to. So unless I can come up with some really, really potent, powerful reason for some specific moment, then really God is saying, look, the best thing for you and for the faith is just to let it go. You're right. Maybe it's not fair. Maybe it's not good, but we've got more important things right now to get through and to worry about. So instead of focusing on that, let's focus on the bigger and the greater.

Jeff Laird

If people look at believers and they say, look, those Christians, they don't really complain about a whole lot. They don't buck the system a whole lot. Well, then when we do, that means it actually means something. And people understand how powerful it is when a Christian says on that, I absolutely refuse to cooperate. I don't care what you do to me. I am not doing that.

Jeff Laird

Well, in the context of somebody who's generally cooperating with the law, even if they don't like it, that's very powerful. If it's just one more thing and a long list of stuff you want to complain about, then it's not. So again, the idea is not that we're supposed to say, oh, yeah, we're supposed to love it.

We're supposed to think it's wonderful. Or like you said, Kevin, that we're not supposed to do anything about it. But spiritually and practically, even from a secular standpoint, on the practical side, we are probably better off submitting to paying of taxes and working to change it than trying to be obstinate about it and doing something illegal that's ultimately not really going to help.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, I agree with you 100% regarding people's attitudes. And when you fight about everything, you tend to lose your voice. When you complain about everything or all you ever do is complain about the government. And even on the stuff that's reasonable, you lose your ability to actually have an impact on speaking on issues because, oh, you're just a complainer.

Shea Houdmann

I was in preparation because I was reading some various articles on other sites in addition to the ones on GotQuestions. And I read one that I found fascinating. And ultimately, his conclusion was this whole resistance to paying taxes comes from the same heart-sin problem as people who don't give to

their church. That it's ultimately a matter of greed, of wanting to keep more of your money for yourself rather than giving it towards the things that God tells you to give it to. There are really a few specific things in scripture like we're supposed to pay our taxes, we're supposed to support the church and or ministries and or causes that we believe honor and glorifies God. And then giving to those in need would be the four main areas where scripture tells us to give. People who resist that, ultimately, it's a matter of greed and that they want their money so they can spend it on their own pleasures rather than giving it to the things that God tells you to. What do you two think of that? And do you think that's a valid conclusion?

Jeff Laird

I'm inclined to say that you want to be careful at least to define terms. In other words, when God says, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's, that doesn't mean treat Caesar like God, treat them equally. It means that there are some things to which we do owe Caesar, those things we give. There are some things to which we owe God, those things we give him. And those are separate in a sense. They're not identical that we're doing the same for both. So, you know, I think it's good for us to focus on the idea that, look, God does tell us that we're supposed to do this and we're supposed to do it for a reason. But we are also told that we don't have to like everything that God calls us to do. And sometimes we're going to do things that are not helpful for our lives. But again, we're supposed to focus on the things that we need to emphasize, that we're supposed to focus on. So instead of arguing and fighting about this, I can focus on that.

Jeff Laird

I try to live that out of my own life, for the most part, with my family, with my church. I'm the type of person who typically does not complain. I just make an effort to sort of live with it. I don't complain about the thermostat. I don't complain about what my food tastes like, more or less. But in general, I'd like to think that when I do stand up and say, hey, hang on a second, I don't like that. And I don't think that's a good idea. People are more inclined to listen because it strikes them as, this is not something we hear very often. He's typically going to go along with things and not worry. So when I do, it means something.

Jeff Laird

So I think it's okay for us to take the approach of saying, I need to think of this in the same level as I do all the other obligations God gives me. And is this really about me objecting to evil? Or is it just about me objecting to the financial side? And as long as we remember that God doesn't always ask us

to do things we like, and not everything is subject to our personal preferences, then it's not a bad way to go about it, I guess.

Kevin Stone

I think just in response to that article that you had read, Shea, I mean, if somebody doesn't pay their taxes, they refuse, there may be an element of greed involved in there, sure. It could also just be cantankerousness, or some people are just more oppositional than others. Or there may also be a true desire to be good stewards of their own resources, which is a good thing. It's not good that they refuse to pay taxes, but the motivation might be more than just greed. I wouldn't go as far as to label all of that as greedy.

Kevin Stone

But I think when we look at Scripture, as we've said, it's very plain that we are to follow the laws of the land and to pay our taxes. Of course, if the laws of the land allow for tax shelters and ways to pay less, have deductions, then by all means, we should take advantage of those things because that is better stewardship of our money. God gives us resources and we need to steward them wisely. There's no sense in giving the government more than what they're asking for. We should follow the law. It would be the illegal tax sheltering and the illegal finding of loopholes or whatever that would be unethical and wrong for the believer.

Kevin Stone

If we live in a country that allows us to be involved in the political process, then another responsibility that believers have is to go ahead and be active in watching the government's expenditures. Is the government using the tax money for moral purposes, for good and upright purposes? Are they promoting virtue? Or is this tax money being used for immoral purposes? Are they promoting vice? And if that's the case, then Christians need to be involved. They need to let their voice be heard. They need to take action and make sure that this tax money is being spent on what is good and right and going to be beneficial to all the citizens of the land.

Kevin Stone

And also, it may be that the tax code itself needs to be changed. And if the political process allows for the changing of laws based on the votes of its citizens, then by all means, Christians should be involved in that process as well. And if the tax code needs to be changed, the laws need to be changed, then we should be working to change those laws to make them more fair, more just, more equitable, to use a couple of the buzzwords of today. But make sure that the tax code is good, that it's actually beneficial and it's not overly complicated and all the rest. So there are several things that we can do as believers to trying to adjust the collection of the taxes and also the

expenditure of the taxes. And these are good things for us to be involved with and at the same time, in the meantime, to be paying our taxes according to the law.

Jeff Laird

And to emphasize also, those are all things, a lot of those things are things that are going to come down to some level of Christian liberty or difference of opinion. This core idea that generally speaking, we're supposed to submit to government and we're supposed to pay taxes, does not necessarily mean that all Christians are obligated to agree. I think this spending program is good or I think that spending program is bad, or I think this is the right use. We're gonna disagree on where we're supposed to spend these tax revenues. Do I think this construction project is too much or not enough? Do we're spending enough on healthcare or not enough? Is it too much with the military? Are we not spending enough in the military? None of those are biblical discussions.

Jeff Laird

And it's really important as Christians, when we do get into this topic and want to talk about it, that we remember that the finer points of that, like the practical side of where do I think is a good idea or a bad idea to spend the money is not anywhere near on the same level as whether or not I should be following those Romans 13 obligations in the first place. So it's okay for us to have disagreements. We just got to remember, not all of these are on a biblical level.

Shea Houdmann

Right, exactly right. This has been an interesting episode to prepare for and just to have this conversation. But it's like, again, I think all of us, and I think most rational humans would wish they could pay less in taxes than we do. It's a lot more other things I'd rather my money go to than some of the things we see in government. But scripturally speaking, trust me, after nearly 25 years and hundreds of thousands of questions and hundreds of millions of page views on articles, if there was a loophole in scripture for paying taxes, we would have found it by now. It does not exist.

Shea Houdmann

So I can't think of a better way to close this episode just by reiterating Romans 13, verses six to seven. Or because of this, referring to the previous verses, you also pay taxes. For the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them. To whom taxes are owed, pay taxes. Revenue to whom revenue is owed. Respect to whom respect is owed. Honor to whom honor is owed.

Shea Houdmann

Scripture could not be more clear. We are to pay taxes. In Corinthians, it talks about giving cheerfully. There's no verse that says pay taxes cheerfully. But when we give to the church, give to God, we are to do that cheerfully, joyfully. Paying taxes, we are under no such instruction. I don't think God expects us to, oh, I just love giving to the government. But at the same time, we are clearly called to obey God in this. And that is to pay taxes, pay what is owed. As we talked about, every legal means to reduce our tax burden, that's perfectly fine. But we are still to pay our taxes.

Shea Houdmann

So probably not going to be the most popular episode ever on the Got Questions podcast. But I think this is an important one because it's something we struggle with. It's hard to keep the right attitude. And every year, especially around tax paying time, we get this question a lot about paying taxes to ungodly government, paying taxes where funds are being misused, all these things. And none of it actually impacts what Scripture commands, that is to pay our taxes.

Shea Houdmann

So Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me today for this conversation. I hope our conversation has been edifying, encouraging, informative to you. Our goal is to, this is what the Bible says. This is what God's word says. And our job is to understand it and submit to it. Got questions? The Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.