

Was Jesus a Socialist? Part 3

This is part three of a four-part essay. Click these links for part one and part two. When the first version of this essay appeared in January 2015, several “progressive” friends raised Romans 13:1–7 as evidence contrary to my thesis. (Similar sentiments are expressed in 1 Peter 2:13–20 and Titus 3:1–3.) In the Romans 13 passage, the apostle Paul urges submission to the governing authorities and warns against rebellion. He also says that if you owe taxes, pay your taxes. So a socialist or “progressive” of today might say this blesses all sorts of things including redistribution, a welfare state, or whatever the state wants to do either *for* you or *to* you. This is quite a leap. Here, as in all other parts of the Bible, context is important. Paul was speaking to early Christians in an environment seething with anti-Roman feeling. He undoubtedly did not want the growth of Christianity to be sidetracked by violence or other provocations against the Romans that would be brutally repressed. He was attempting to set the people’s sights on what he regarded as higher things of greater immediate importance. But it’s a larger error to extrapolate what Paul said to justify one particular view of the role of government, namely a “progressive” or “socialist” one. Suppose the “governing authorities” run a minimal state with Constitutional strictures and guarantees of personal liberties and private property. Suppose, furthermore, that the rules of that arrangement clearly advise the governed, “We protect you from aggressions against your rights and property but we don’t otherwise give you free stuff. You’re entitled to your liberties; to engage in private, voluntary charity and commerce, to deal with each other peacefully; to live as you choose so long as you each do no harm to another. But we in government will not rob Peter to pay Paul.” There is nothing in Romans 13:1–7 that says these “governing authorities” are owed any less respect than if they were welfare-state

redistributionists. So clearly, the verses of Romans 13:1–7 assert the legitimacy of government *per se* but do not ordain what today's "progressives" and socialists demand. The Bible, in fact, is full of stories about people who bravely and righteously resisted the overreach of governments. Does anyone really believe that if Jesus had been preaching just before the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, he would have declared, "Pharaoh demands that you stay, so unpack those bags and get back to work?" Norman Horn, a chemical engineer, research scientist, and founder of , notes that both the Old and New Testaments provide numerous instances of laudatory disobedience to the state:

Hebrews defying Pharaoh's decrees to murder their infants (Exodus 1); Rahab lying to the King of Jericho about the Hebrew spies (Joshua 2); Ehud deceiving the king's ministers and assassinating the king (Judges 3); Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to comply with the king's decrees, and miraculously saved twice for doing so (Daniel 3 and 6); the Magi from the East disobeying Herod's direct orders (Matthew 2); and Peter and John choosing to obey God rather than men (Acts 5).[6]

At the risk of belaboring the point, I share these insightful comments from a conversation with my colleague Jeffrey Tucker of the Foundation for Economic Education:

Mary, Jesus, and Joseph fled Bethlehem rather than submit to Herod's order to kill all infants. If Romans 13 meant that everyone must submit always, Jesus would have been murdered in the weeks after his birth.... Resistance, of course, can be moral. Christianity has inspired resistance to the state throughout history and in modern times, from the American Revolution to the civil rights protests to the Polish resistance against communism. Jesus himself set the example: he avoided government when he could, resisted in prudent ways when possible, and ultimately complied when he had to.

*This is part three of a four-part essay. Click these links for part one and part two. The full article was originally published by the **Foundation for Economic Education**. The full book can be downloaded here.*