

Romans 13:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But 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.

Analysis

For he is the minister of God to thee for good—Theou gar diakonos estin soi eis to agathon (θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονος ἐστίν σοι εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν). The ruler is God's diakonos (servant/minister)—the same word used for church deacons (Philippians 1:1) and Paul's apostolic ministry (2 Corinthians 3:6). Government is divine service, whether rulers acknowledge God or not. Eis to agathon (for good) defines government's purpose—promoting citizens' welfare, establishing justice.

But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain—Ou gar eikē tēn machairan phorei (οὐ γὰρ εἰκῇ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ, 'for he does not bear the sword in vain'). Machaira (sword) represents coercive force, including capital punishment. Eikē (in vain) means without purpose—government's sword is purposeful, authorized by God. Ekdikos eis orgēn (ἐκδικος εἰς ὀργήν, 'avenger to execute wrath') designates government as executor of divine justice against wickedness.

Historical Context

Roman magistrates carried the gladius (sword) as symbol of authority (ius gladii, right of the sword), including capital punishment. Paul affirms this as God-ordained, not merely human convention. This verse grounds Christian support for

just war theory and capital punishment, though debated. Early Christians generally opposed participating in military service or executions, though acknowledging government's right. Augustine and Aquinas later developed 'just war' criteria, arguing Christians could participate in government's coercive function.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does calling government officials '*theou diakonos*' (God's servants) shape Christian attitudes toward authority, even when rulers are unjust or unbelieving?
2. What does the '*machaira*' (sword) authorize—police force, military defense, capital punishment—and are there limits to government coercion?
3. How do you reconcile government as 'avenger to execute wrath' with Jesus' command to love enemies and turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-44)?

Interlinear Text

θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν, σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν ἐὰν
of God For the minister he is to thee for ^{G3588} **good** **if**
G2316 G1063 G1249 G2076 G4671 G1519 G18 G1437

δὲ τὸ κακὸν ποιῆς φοβοῦ· οὐ γὰρ εἰκῇ τὴν
But ^{G3588} **evil** **thou do** **be afraid** **not** **For** **in vain** ^{G3588}
G1161 G2556 G4160 G5399 G3756 G1063 G1500

μάχαιραν φορεῖ· θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν, ἔκδικος εἰς
the sword he beareth of God For the minister he is a revenger for
G3162 G5409 G2316 G1063 G1249 G2076 G1558 G1519

ὀργὴν τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι
to execute wrath ^{G3588} ^{G3588} **evil** **him that doeth**
G3709 G2556 G4238

Additional Cross-References

Romans 12:19 (Judgment): Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

Proverbs 16:14 (Judgment): The wrath of a king is as messengers of death: but a wise man will pacify it.

Proverbs 20:2 (Parallel theme): The fear of a king is as the roaring of a lion: whoso provoketh him to anger sinneth against his own soul.

2 Chronicles 19:6 (Judgment): And said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the LORD, who is with you in the judgment.

Romans 13:6 (References God): For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.