

God, Government, and You

Romans 13:1-7

Today we come to Romans 13. The first seven verses of this chapter are one of the central New Testament passages regarding how we as Christians should relate to human government. Before we jump into the text let me give you this qualification: this sermon will not answer all your questions about Christianity and the government. As always, my goal is to do my best to communicate what God says in His Word. I don't want to say anything more than what the Bible says, but I also don't want to say any less than what the Scripture teaches. I will not give you prepackaged answers for every situation that you may encounter in your dealings with government. You may still have unanswered questions when we are done today. But my goal is to lay down some tracks for you to run on so that we will think biblically about the subject of civil government.

First, I want us to remember the context of this passage. Paul has been writing about how believers are to live in love and to get along peaceably with all people. He has just forbidden taking personal vengeance and has advocated treating with kindness those who mistreat us. Three weeks ago when I taught that passage in Romans 12 I used an illustration of a nurse who treated with kindness her husband's killer. After the sermon someone asked me about that case because I had said that it was a soldier who had killed this nurse's brother. And so it raises the question of the use of force in war and police actions. It also raises other questions like, *"Is it right to report those who mistreat us to civil authorities for prosecution?"* or *"Is it wrong to use force to resist an aggressor?"* So perhaps Paul was anticipating questions like these when he turns next to the topic of civil government. Part of what Paul will show is that it is proper for the government to protect law-abiding citizens and to punish evildoers.

Also remember that Paul was writing to Christians in Rome, some of whom were Jews. Claudius, the previous emperor, had expelled the Jews from Rome a few years before this because he viewed them as dangerous (Acts 18:2). The Jews hated being under Roman rule. The Roman officials usually viewed Christians as a Jewish sect, so that suspicion of revolution was always a concern in the minds of the rulers. When Paul wrote Romans, Nero, one of the most evil rulers of all time, was on the throne. A few years after Paul writes this letter Nero will begin to persecute Christians intensely, burning them at the stake, slaughtering them in the arenas, and beheading them.

So Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be clear on how they should relate to the civil government. Paul's words were vital in his own day, and they are just as important to us in the 21st century. Let us consider what God requires of us in our relationship to civil government.

Let's begin by reading the passage,

- 1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.
- 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.
- 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.
- 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.
- 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.
- 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.
- 7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

In verse one Paul lays out the precept we are all to follow,

Precept: Be subject to the governing authorities (13:1)

Paul gives us a very clear command that is addressed to all people without exception. “**Every soul**” is included in this instruction. Every person is required to be in subjection to the governing authorities. There was no exclusion for the Roman Christians because Nero was corrupt or evil. There is no exception for us either just because we may disagree politically with those in power.

The word "subjection" is *hupotasso*. It comes from *huper*, which means under, to be under something, and the word *tasso*, which means to orderly arrange something. So subjection means to orderly arrange yourself under the authority that God has established. Subjection certainly includes obedience, but it implies even more. Subjection focuses on the spirit or attitude of the person which leads to obedience. It recognizes that we owe to the authority over not only our obedience but also our respect.

The authorities in view here are the governing authorities, those authorities which govern us politically. The phrase "governing authorities" literally means the “*higher powers*.” I am to orderly arrange myself under the ones who have the right and the might over me. Now notice, it doesn’t say to orderly arrange yourself under the authorities who love Jesus and always do right. Again you see, there are no exceptions given for a ruler’s incompetence. He may be immoral, he may be cruel, he may be godless, it doesn’t matter. We are to subject ourselves under his authority. And in case we missed it Paul repeats it in verse 5, “**Therefore you must be subject.**”

Some of you might be thinking, "Well, wait a minute. If we are to obey the authorities, doesn't it matter if they are pagan? What if they forbid us to worship Jesus? What if they command us to break God's laws? Aren't there exceptions in Scripture?"

Yes, from several Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments we can reasonably come to the conclusion that there are exceptions to the rule or precept Paul has laid down here. When government demands that we do something that God forbids, we must obey God first. When government forbids us to do what God has commanded, again we must obey God first. But here in this passage we are not talking about the exceptions. We are talking about the rule.

While the Christian may not, in good conscience before God, be able to obey the government in every instance, true submission to the government is never actually set aside. Generally, submission is exhibited by one's obedience. But even when we cannot obey, we can still demonstrate a submissive spirit. This submissive spirit should never be set aside when it comes to those in authority over us.

Let me give two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. In Daniel chapter 3, Daniel's three friends were commanded to bow down before an image of gold. They refused, and rightly so, for they could not serve God and bow down to an idol. But the way in which they declined to do so demonstrated a submissive spirit. They did not refuse to obey all of the king's commands, only this one. They knew that disobedience might cost them their lives, and they were willing to pay this price. They did not advocate the overthrow of this government, and they were willing to submit to the death penalty if necessary. The same is true of Daniel himself in chapter 6, where Daniel will not cease praying to his God. Daniel refuses to comply with a specific law, and even the king agrees with him and hopes for his rescue.

In Acts chapter 5 the Sanhedrin has demanded that the apostles (Peter and John) stop preaching in the name of Jesus. This they cannot do, lest they disobey God. Though they could not and would not stop preaching about their resurrected Lord, they did not challenge the authority of this body. Their answer was evidence of their submissive spirit and intent: **"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard"** (Acts 4:19-20). The apostles had to obey God. But in doing so they also willingly subjected themselves to the punishment of the earthly rulers. Submission usually is demonstrated by our obedience, but even when we must disobey, we can and should do so in a submissive spirit and manner.

Therefore God commands us to subjection to the authority of legitimate governmental agents at all times and in all cases. Subjection usually, but not always, results in obedience. Submission always gives **"honor to whom honor"** is due (Romans 13:7).

In the remaining verses of this text, Paul gives us some reasons for our submission to human government.

Reasons for our subjection to human government:

1. Civil government is ordained by God. (Rom. 13:1-2)

Look again at Romans 13:1, **“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”**

Paul’s main reason for our subjection to the governing authorities is that these authorities are ordained by God. Paul is presupposing that we understand that God Himself is the ultimate authority. God is sovereign. He is the sole authority of His creation. Therefore all human authority is delegated to men by God. No one has authority independent of God.

This is not a stand-alone passage of Scripture. Let’s turn to some other passages so that we’re not guilty of “proof-texting” from just one verse.

- Titus 3:1-2: **“1 Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men.”**
- 1 Peter 2:13-17: **“13 Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- 16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. 17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”**
- Proverbs 21:1: ***“The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.”***
- Isaiah 45:1 says that God used King Cyrus to accomplish His purposes: ***“Thus says the Lord to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held-- To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut.”***
- Daniel 2:21: ***“And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise And knowledge to those who have understanding.”***
- In Daniel 4:32, after King Nebuchadnezzar boasted about building Babylon, the Almighty answers: ***“And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. They shall make you eat grass like oxen; and seven times shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.”*** Then, after Nebuchadnezzar repents, he says these words that show us that he now knows God to be big and mighty and in control in verse 35: ***“All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does***

according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"

· In John 19:11, Jesus puts Pilate in his proper place. After Pilate bragged about possessing power, Jesus says this: ***"You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above."***

Whether democratic or autocratic, heathen or God-fearing, liberating or oppressive, every government which has the power to rule over its people has been granted that power and authority by God.

Submission to government then is an expression of our submission to God. In fact in verse 2 Paul points out that **"whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God."** To resist government authority is to rebel against God. God has instituted human government to exercise divinely delegated authority over men. We should be subject to human governments for this reason alone. But Paul also adds some very practical reasons for our subjection in verses 2-7. These provide additional motivation for our obedience to this divine command.

2. The purpose of Government is to punish evil and reward good (Rom. 13:3-4)

Look at verses 3-4:

3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

Paul is presenting the *general* purpose and practice of government: to protect those who do right and to punish those who do wrong. When government is working at its best evil doers are punished and those who do good are rewarded. Granted, there have been many exceptions throughout history. We live in a sin-corrupted world. There have been rulers and governments that are evil. Corrupt governments punish law-abiding citizens who speak out against the corruption and they reward scoundrels who help keep them in power.

But imagine the alternative. If there were laws protecting human life and property, if there were no police force, no military, and no consequence for evil behavior, then there would be anarchy. No one and nothing would be safe. It is in the heart of sinful man to rebel and cast off all restraints and do whatever selfishly pleases us. God puts human government in place to restrain evil and to promote good.

That means that anarchy is never an option for the Christian. We may disagree, we may vote against a certain person or a particular ballot initiative, we may picket or write letters. But we must never join the ranks of the anarchists who

say, “Down with all government.” Such a view is not Christian. Even bad government is better than no government at all.

Ordinarily, when we are doing good we need not fear government. Christians should be the best citizens, for their calling is consistent with government’s divine commission. But we should fear government when we choose to do evil. Only the law-breaker looks over his shoulder, wondering where the police are. Christians ought to be known as law-abiding citizens.

3. By submission to government we keep a clear conscience (Rom. 13:5-7)

Romans 13:5: **“Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.”** Paul means that we should be subject to our government not only because we fear punishment if we break the law, but also because we fear God, who knows our hearts. This makes keeping the laws of our land not just a matter of outward compliance, but also of inward obedience to God.

With outward compliance, you are honest on your income tax forms because you’re afraid that if you aren’t, you might get caught. With inward obedience, you are honest because you want to have a clear conscience before God, who reads your tax forms before you send them in! To obey because of wrath is to not speed for fear of a ticket. To obey for conscience sake is to follow the speed limit because God knows and cares if you have a lead foot.

It’s not just so that we don’t get caught; it’s so that our conscience stays clear. Or to say it this way: We’re to submit to authorities because it’s the right thing to do. Many people submit to avoid wrath but don’t do so for the sake of conscience. They reason, “As long as I can get away with it and avoid the punishment then I have no problem breaking the law.”

Paul set an example for us in the way he lived. In Acts 23:1 he says, **“Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day,”** and in Acts 24:16: **“This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.”**

Two applications:

1. Pay taxes (Rom. 13:6-7)

For the third time Paul mentions that government officials are servants of God, but this time he uses a different word that is sometimes used for those who serve in the temple and also of angels (Heb. 1:7). This may hint that these officials are performing a sacred function. Paul uses two words for taxes. The first refers to direct taxes paid by subject nations, such as property tax and income tax. The second word refers to more indirect tax, such as sales tax and customs.

Although I often disagree with how our government spends our tax dollars, I must pay my taxes conscientiously before the Lord. We can protest our taxes through proper channels and we can vote for those who might lower our taxes, but we aren’t free to opt out of paying our taxes.

Jesus believed in paying taxes and led his disciples to do the same, even though the Roman government to which He paid them crucified Him.

2. Pay respect (Rom. 13:7)

Of all the citizens in the world, followers of Christ should be the best. We see this in verse 7: **“Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”** This verse is so clear it needs very little comment. Because government authorities are “ministers of God,” they deserve four things from us: Taxes, revenue, respect and honor.

We can learn a lot about respect and honor from the example of the Apostle Paul when he was brought before a governmental authority in Acts 26:2-3: ***“I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, 3 especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.”*** Because Paul was polite and respectful, he gained a hearing to share the gospel.

In his Epistle to Diognetus, an anonymous second-century Christian wrote the following beautiful description of believers who genuinely obey the commands of Romans 13:1-7:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.

“They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet suffer all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their babies. They share their table with all, but not their bed with all. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. “They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their exemplary lives. They love all men and yet are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonored and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and

bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. "When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. To sum it all up in one word—what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world." (As found in "The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 9-16," page 240). (original online - ([Diognetus. The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus - CHAPTER V -- THE MANNERS OF THE CHRISTIANS](#)))

Does that describe you as a Christian?