

Let Every Person Be Subject to the Governing Authorities

Romans 13:1-7

“For submission Christ has set us free, stand firm therefore, and do not break free from the authorities over you.” Somehow that does not inspire us like Paul’s words in Galatians:

^{ESV} **Galatians 5:1** For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

What if God sent Moses to the Israelites, not to break free from the grip of the Egyptians, but to make the Israelites more submissive? Somehow, I don’t think we would be as enthusiastic about retelling the story. Declarations of submission are not as popular as Declarations of Independence.

Submissiveness did not make it onto the list of the Fruit of the Spirit. But having an attitude of submissiveness is a mark of godliness. In fact, having a rebellious spirit that rejects authority is a mark of being unsaved. Let that sink in. Submission is not something only for wives, or children. Every Christian must learn submission. Jesus modeled submission himself when he told the Father, “... not my will but yours be done.”

Within each one of us is a rebellious spirit. We want to rule ourselves. And this attitude must be crushed if we are to enjoy eternity with Christ as our Lord and King. Some will say, “I don’t have a problem submitting to Jesus. I have a problem submitting to other people.”

The passage before us today will certainly challenge this way of thinking.

Read Romans 13:1-7.

We read these words some 2,000 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Generations of Christians have lived and died in every conceivable political climate. So, it is hard for us to place ourselves in the mindset of the Christians who lived in that first generation after Christ’s ascension into heaven. When Jesus lived in Palestine, the Jews were ruled by Rome. Insurrections and revolts were commonplace. Most Jews yearned for another Moses to redeem them from the cruelty of Roman rule. Jesus presented himself as Israel’s Redeemer, but he did not throw off the yoke of the Romans. This was

confusing to many. Instead, he taught things like, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

And before going to the cross, he told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." How different is this from what Moses said to Pharaoh?

"Let my people go, that they may serve me. (Ex. 8:1)

Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords to whom every knee shall bow. But his kingdom, at this time, is an invisible kingdom. He rules in the hearts of his subjects. Only when he returns, and all his subjects have raised up from their graves, will he set up his eternal, visible kingdom.

You know this. It is your hope. But for that first generation of believers, it was radically new. And it raised the question, "How are we to relate to governing authorities who themselves do not recognize Jesus as their King and Master?"

"Are we to fight to conquer them so that we can set up Christian rulers?"

"Are we to get away from them entirely?"

"Are we to resist them and their policies?"

"What is to be our posture towards the governing authorities of the lands in which we find ourselves?"

Paul's teaching is clear: We are to be subject to them.

Let every person be subject
to the governing authorities.

Those words must have grated against those First Century Christians just as much as they rub us wrong today. Surely, they must have raised their objections before they even finished reading these short 7 verses. How many of you have already formulated in your own mind your own exception clauses to Paul's commands? I know I have my own list.

And we will talk about those objections, those exceptions. It is necessary that we do if you are going to hear the whole counsel of God's Word on these matters. But it is telling that Paul does not lay out any objections. Throughout the book of Romans, Paul loves to anticipate the objections people might have and to give answers to them. But not here. He lays down the rule in its purest form and lets it sit there.

To open the door of exceptions would have the effect of overwhelming the rule itself. We too must beware of spending our time defending the exceptions that we lose the main point: the importance of submission.

So, while we will deal with the biblical limitations on submission, we will only do this in a limited way at the end. We must first lay down the principle itself, following Paul's example. **Submission to unbelieving civil government is not a hindrance to our submission to Christ but an aid to it.**

That is a radical statement. If you lived under Moses, or Joshua, or David, this would have made no sense. These men would have led you to conquer all God's foes. Submission to the Egyptians, or to the Philistines, or to the Canaanites, would have been unthinkable. But that is the command of Paul, and God, to us as followers of Jesus Christ.

You do not have to throw off ungodly earthly authorities to submit to Jesus Christ. And your response to the Gospel is not inhibited by the presence of ungodly government rulers over you. No matter the situation in which you find yourself, you can believe in Jesus Christ. You can repent of your own sins and trust in the blood of Christ to wash them away. And, by the help of the Holy Spirit, you can set apart Christ as Lord of your heart. No human ruler can ever rob you of these things. And you can always have the hope that either in this life, or in eternity, Jesus will conquer all his and your enemies. No human ruler can truly impede the working of the Spirit in the hearts of those whom God has chosen for eternal life. And God has ordained even ungodly rulers to aid you in your submission to Jesus.

"There are indeed always some tumultuous spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ cannot be sufficiently elevated, unless all earthly powers be abolished, and that they cannot enjoy liberty given by him (Jesus), except they shake off every yoke of human subjection." Calvin

How is it possible that Christians can obey God while submitting to ungodly governing authorities? What is Paul's rationale as to why Christians must submit to non-Christian government rulers?

1. Government rulers exist under the Sovereign rule of God.

For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. God is absolutely sovereign over every ruler who finds himself as a ruler in this life. Behind the secular rulers of this world stands the authority of God.

Paul does not give us any exceptions to this rule. Even the worst rulers of history existed under God's sovereign decree.

This does not mean:

- that God morally approves of every ruler.
- that rulers are above the judgment of God.

It does mean:

- that the overthrow of rulers must also be under the sovereign hand of God.

Paul teaches simply, that during the time that a ruler does hold authority, he does so because God has purposes for his doing so. No ruler is in power by accident or exists independent of God's overarching rule. God's rule is not threatened by the rule of ungodly rulers. We may be threatened by ungodly rulers. But God is most certainly not threatened by them.

This should be of great comfort to every believer. We serve a sovereign God. But comfort is not Paul's intent here.

² Therefore

whoever resists the authorities
resists what God has appointed,
and
those who resist
will incur judgment.

2. Resistance to authority is resistance to God.
3. Those who resist will incur judgment.

The judgment of which Paul speaks is the judgment of God. Now, it may be mediated through the judgment inflicted by the authorities. But God's judgment stands behind those authorities. We are rebels at heart. We love autonomy. We do not like anyone telling us what to do. And as believers we can use our allegiance to Jesus as a cover, hiding our rebelliousness.

The word for resist is *antitasso*: It means to set oneself against, to oppose, to be hostile toward. Civil authorities are tangible. It is hard to hide or mask your

rebelliousness to them. Submission to God is easier to fake. Spiritual rebelliousness is easier to mask. Therefore, God sets up a tangible way to identify our rebelliousness. Having a rebellious attitude toward civil authorities is a mark of having a rebellious attitude toward God.

It is good and right for each one of us to ask the question: Do I have a rebellious spirit towards the civil authorities? I doubt that there is anyone that can claim absolute perfection in this area. I know that I cannot. It is a sin for which I need the blood of Christ to cover and the Spirit of Christ to correct. But the uncovering of our spirit of rebelliousness is not the only reason why God establishes unbelieving and even ungodly authorities over us. In verses 3-7, we can see God's positive purposes for establishing human governments.

God has designed human governments to promote good and to punish evil in society. I know that you are thinking, "It has been governments who have throughout history orchestrated the greatest evils known to man. Power corrupts." Paul is not so naïve as to have no understanding of the terrible capacity of governments to perpetrate evil. Rulers have often been a terror to those who do good. But even though these are all true, Paul's main concern is that we don't use these facts as an excuse to maintain a rebellious spirit towards authority.

It was shocking to me to see rioting and looting and basic disrespect for authority across our country go unchecked. It was as if the authorities no longer had the right to bear the sword. And those who should be respecting authority had a free pass to mock that authority.

Paul's main point is to challenge believers to not maintain a rebellious spirit to governing authorities. But there are other truths that we can glean from his words.

3 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,
4 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 the servant of God,
an avenger who carries out God's wrath
on the wrongdoer.

If you are a government leader, you are to learn from Paul the purpose for which God has placed you in office. You may have other responsibilities, but fundamental to your authority is the responsibility to promote good and punish evil, and to promote the welfare of those you are over. Therefore the libertarian argument has never been a position I could get behind. It teaches that except for economic transactions the government should have no say in the morality of a society. Paul's words will not let me limit government to that extent. Governments may not be able to determine morality, but they do have an obligation to promote what is good and punish the evil.

God is also the judge of rulers every bit as much as he is the judge of subjects. Leaders are not in the place of God. They are under God. Our forefathers understood this. Our pledge of allegiance is not to the nation apart from God, but rather, under God. One of the problems that we suffer from in America more recently is that we no longer promote a society that affirms a sovereign and holy God who will hold all people accountable for their thoughts, words, and actions. Many Americans have been fed a steady stream of atheism, or Deism. Either way, there is no true fear among those in authority of standing before a Holy God.

It is also clear from these verses that civil authorities have the duty of punishing evil. Therefore they bear the sword. Bearing the sword implies all forms of corporal punishment up to and including capital punishment. In contrast, religious authorities do not "bear the sword." It is not given to church leaders to inflict any sort of physical discipline. We do have an obligation to administer spiritual discipline. We can warn. We can restrain someone from taking the sacrament of communion. And we can cast someone out of the church. But we cannot inflict any sort of physical discipline. Civil authorities can and should do so.

This duty is so necessary for the welfare of society that Paul is willing to call the civil authority "an avenger for God." That is pretty strong since Paul has just said that as individuals, we are to leave vengeance in God's hands. Understanding this is how we can fit together last week's sermon with this one. As an individual, you can fight against the

desire for revenge. You can even seek the welfare of the one who has hurt you. But at the same time, you can allow for the civil authorities to do their job of punishing the evil done to you. The application of justice under the law is not contrary to extending personal love to the criminal.

So, we can see here the role of government and the power of government. But Paul is only concerned for these things tangentially. His primary concern is to explain to believers why government authorities are good. Paul repeatedly states that the civil authority is the servant of God. Paul uses two separate Greek words. In verse 4, he uses the word “diakonos”. This is the word for servant or deacon. But in verse 6, he uses the word “leitourgos”. This is the word used for minister or even priest. It has a spiritual connection. This is one reason why the church has viewed the civil servant as a holy calling.

And so, Paul gives both a negative reason and a positive reason for submitting to ruling authorities. They can be the hand of God’s wrath and they can be the vehicle for God’s blessing. This positive motivation seems to be indicated in Paul’s statement “for the sake of conscience.” You should recognize that civil authorities are good for you, even when you do not like them or agree with them.

This is one reason why the whole “defund the police” movement is foolishness. It is the police that prevents criminals from harming you. Get rid of those police and you will find yourself even worse off.

Anywhere that there is a complete absence of authority, anarchy occurs, and terrible things happen.

- 5 Therefore
 one must be in subjection,
 not only to avoid God's wrath
 but also
 for the sake of conscience.
- 6 For the same reason you also pay taxes,
 for the authorities are ministers of God,
 attending to this very thing.
- 7 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.

Paul makes a distinction between taxes and revenue. Taxes refers to what we would call a direct tax on you as a person. The tax collector came around and demanded that you pay a tax.

Revenue is an indirect tax on goods and services. It is conceivable that a person could question one or the other type of tax. Paul includes both as a part of our obligation to submit to governing authorities.

While the Christian has a duty to pay these taxes, it is not the Christian's duty to determine how that tax is spent. In Paul's day, the Christian had little, if any, control over how governing authorities ruled. I know that this must be somewhat adjusted in a society where the people have some say in how the taxes are spent. But ultimately, it is not the responsibility of the subject to make sure that the taxes are spent well. It is the responsibility of the rulers. They will be held accountable before God.

In our own day, there are many things that our taxes are used for which we do not approve. Just because we do not approve does not mean that we have a right to quit paying taxes.

Respect and honor are also included in demonstrating a submissive attitude. This is where few are guiltless in our own day. The respect and honor are not owed because of our affinity with the rulers themselves. They are owed because of the office they hold. You may not have great respect for a leader's policies, or even his person. But it is right to give a leader honor and respect for the office he holds. This is one reason why choosing to kneel during the national anthem is not a good form of protest. It makes no distinction between the individual abuses of power and the authorities themselves.

You do not have to agree with authorities to give them honor and respect. One perfect example is when John the Baptist confronts King Herod for his adulterous relationship with his brother's sister, Herodia. John is not being unsubmitive to call out Herod's sin. But disagreement, even vigorous disagreement, can be expressed in a respectful, honoring way. It is not always clear when criticism destroys respect, but as Christians, we must remember our duty to honor.

More can be said concerning our duty to our governing authorities. But I must take some time to speak of limitations on this rule. These limitations do not negate the rule, but they do help us to understand the larger picture. Some Christian denominations have not allowed for any sort of resistance or rebellion to government in any situation. I respect them for their zeal to follow Romans 13.

Most within the Reformed Tradition have balanced Romans 13 with other Scriptures allowing for some civil disobedience in some situations. When Peter and the apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin and commanded to not preach the gospel, they very emphatically disobey.

^{ESV} **Acts 5:29** But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.

This makes clear to us that when a government or religious leader gives a command that goes directly against the direct commands of God's Word, as Christians we always have a higher obligation to follow God. In the case of the apostles, their command to preach the gospel was clear. And the case can be made that even in their rebellion, they were being submissive. They were being submissive to their Lord – Jesus Christ.

But knowing how to apply this principle in every situation is not easy. For instance, if a government required its citizens to work on Sunday, that would be a violation of the 4th Commandment. But clearly in the early church, many Christians worked on Sunday. Some were even slaves. Church services were often held early in the morning or late at night on Sunday to make it possible for these Christians to participate. We do not have any command in the NT for Christians to rise up and rebel so that they could have their Sunday's free to keep the Sabbath command.

The Gospel went forth in ungodly societies without revolution. Of course, as biblical thinking took hold in the hearts of more and more people, societies would often change. But change did not occur as Christians "demanded their rights." It is easy to quote Acts 5:29 without really having good justification for doing so. We must be careful that it is not simply a convenient way of justifying our own attitude of rebellion. I am not only speaking to you, but to myself. I am a rebel at heart.

Understanding our propensity to abuse our liberty, it is still good to better understand its principles. And I think it is necessary to understand the limitations placed upon civil authorities, or for that matter, any authority. Every authority is limited to its jurisdiction. You are only required to submit to those authorities to whom are legitimately over you.

Jurisdiction can be thought of in terms of geography. We are under the jurisdiction of the authorities of NC, and the authorities of the Federal Government, and

the authorities of local governments. We do not have to submit to the authorities in California or France, unless of course we are visiting in those jurisdictions.

But jurisdiction can also be limited in terms of life situation. For instance, the civil authorities do not have jurisdiction over your thoughts. Nor do they have jurisdiction over your religion. Nor do they have jurisdiction over your home life. These life situations can be called spheres. There are spheres in which civil authorities do not have jurisdiction. Now, to be fair, even these spheres can overlap. In the case of child abuse, the civil authorities do have jurisdiction to come into the home to protect the child. The government has authority to protect one of its citizens against another.

I am indebted to Charles Hodge for his clarity on these issues. When a civil ruler assumes the authority of a religious leader, or of a parent, he is assuming authority that is not his to assume. Parents certainly have a great deal of authority in the home. But they do not have the authority to take the lives of their children. And they do not have the authority to enforce slavery upon their children.

“The proper sphere of civil government is the civil and social relations of men, and their temporal welfare; conscience, and of course religion, are beyond its jurisdiction, except so far as the best interests of civil society are necessarily connected with them.” Hodge

The very concept of illegitimate authorities are those authorities that seek to transcend their jurisdictions and to destroy the foundations upon which their authority resides.

“No command to do anything morally wrong can be binding; nor can any which transcends the rightful authority of the power whence it emanates.” Hodge

“The design of civil government is not to promote the advantage of the rulers, but of the ruled. They are ordained, and vested with authority, to be a terror to evildoers, and a praise to them that do well. They are the ministers of God for this end, and are appointed for ‘this very thing’ On this ground our obligation to obedience rests, and the obligation ceases when this design is systematically, constantly, and notoriously disregarded.” Hodge

When a ruler no longer cares for what is good. And/or when a ruler purposely begins to oppose the Church, he makes himself the Beast of Revelation 13.

Revelation 13:5-10 ⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear: ¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

There are civil governments who purposely oppose the Church and God. But even in these situations, the primary hope of the Christian is not revolution, but endurance and faith.

What about Dietrich Bonhoeffer participating in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler?

I will be brief. It is the duty of authorities who find themselves under the authority of a tyrant, to oppose the authority of that tyrant. In this case, they are not simply rebelling. They are exercising their responsibility to care for those under them. And, it is not wrong for those under their jurisdiction to participate with them in their efforts. At the same time, we should be gracious with believers who think differently. Not every German who disagreed with Hitler, came to the point of their resistance to him at the same moment or in the same way. For instance, Schindler opposed Nazism by working to secretly get Jews out of Germany. The purpose was not rebellion, but the promotion of life, and the establishment of legitimate authority.

A similar argument was used as the foundation of our own American Revolution. The American Revolution was not simply a revolution of the masses against authority. Legitimate authorities in the colonies were reacting to what they considered to be the abuses of the authority of King George. This is what distinguishes the American Revolution from the French Revolution. Our founding fathers were extremely wise to establish authority and its limitations in some ways even before the armies began fighting.

Historians will argue the merits of the American Revolution. And certainly, some who fought may have simply wanted to rebel. But our forefathers believed that they were following their obligation to care for their citizens against a tyrant.

“The gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy.” Hodge

In conclusion...

Your greatest enemy is your own rebellious nature. It is for submission that Christ has set you free. Learning submission is a fruit of the Holy Spirit living within you. Although, no Christian has so perfectly learned submission that he or she can claim perfect. It is the duty of every Christian to seek the grace of God to grow in submission. The authorities in this life, including the civil authorities, have been established by God to help you learn submission.

If you must, out of some higher conviction, rebel from an authority, search your heart as to your motivation. If it is to buck authority, God will hold you accountable. And beware of placing yourself in a situation in which you have little if any authorities over you. We need tangible authority. And be thankful for the civil authorities in our own land. As much as we might disagree with their policies, we benefit from them every day.

It really is for “submission” that Christ has set you free.