

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 4 of 13)

The Gospel and the Government

Romans 13:1-7

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¹ 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. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this 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 (Romans 13:1-7).

American culture is in the middle of a sweeping moral and societal revolution. There have been other seasons of cultural change and shifting values, but the last ten years have featured a pace that has been stunning. I remember a very different feeling in my soul after the 2012 election, when a number of states easily passed referendums on same-sex marriage, rejected constitutional amendments for traditional marriage, and approved the legalization of marijuana. The ballot-initiatives gave me a clear sense that our culture was changing very quickly, and I began to feel like an exile.

The challenge, however, is not primarily a political one. There are deep cultural challenges on multiple fronts. Let me give you a few examples:

- In the next two weeks the Supreme Court will rule on whether same-sex marriage is a constitutional right.
- The topic of transgender is now front and center due to Bruce or Caitlyn Jenner's "identification" as a woman.
- Just a few months ago we observed the national fire-storm and the subsequent economic pressure that centered in Indiana in regard to religious liberties.
- Christian business owners, executives, board members, and Christian educational institutions are trying to navigate the new legal and public relations landscape as it relates to religious liberties.

But the issues in our culture are not just about sexuality, marriage, and gender. There are other very significant challenges:

- "Black lives matter" is the painful expression of sorrow that many African-Americans feel as they hear about yet another black man who was shot and killed.

- We have seen protests all over the country and violent clashes with police in cities like Ferguson and Baltimore.
- With each flare-up we learn about the levels of frustration and mistrust that exists between law enforcement and people in the community.

Something is happening in our culture. I remember Troy Riggs, the Director of Public Safety for Indianapolis, telling me that it used to be that when a police officer appeared on the scene, most people would stop and respond to their instructions. A few years ago, he noticed that people would not listen and would run away. Now that there is neither fear nor respect, people are running toward a police officer to attack.

In the midst of this cultural challenge, there is a very important question as to the role of the government. Is government the solution, the problem, or something else? How should Christians relate to the government in its imperfection and its brokenness? What if the government becomes an adversary? And how should we think about the concept of authority in all of this?

Over the last few months, our Elders have been actively discussing these issues, especially as they relate to the issue of same-sex marriage. Next week, after the Fresh Encounter service, I am going to give those of you who are interested an update on some of our discussions and to give you some specific thoughts about whether or not a believer should attend a same-sex wedding. We plan to have more discussions in the future about all of these cultural issues, including the issues surrounding race.

I think it is providential that we are in Romans 13:1-7 today, and I want to help you understand what this text teaches us about how a Christian should view the government. This text is a very helpful framework for having a Christian mindset as you think, interact, and work with structures of authority.

The Principle: Be subject to governing authorities

Verse 1 begins our instruction with a very simple and clear command: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” Once again we see a sweeping statement that Paul intends to be applied broadly. In the same way that, according to Romans 12:3, everyone should not think more highly of themselves, Paul applies the same sweeping instruction as it relates to governing authorities.

This is another application of what it means to be a “living sacrifice” from Romans 12:1-2 and what it means to discern the will of God. In other words, how a Christian relates to the government specifically, and authority in general, is very much a part of what the Christian life is all about. Christ-like character has public square implications. Believers express their commitment to God in how they relate to rulers and the law of the state.¹

Now why would he make this kind of statement or raise this issue here? Let me give you a number of potential reasons:²

¹ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/subject-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-1>

1. In commanding believers to not be conformed to the world in Romans 12:1, Paul recognizes that this sets up a collision course with the world and its system. Government is a part of that system, and Rome was the capital of the world's superpower.
2. Christians are called to submit to and affirm the Lordship of Christ (Matt. 28:18), and the frequent connection between government and religion (i.e., emperor worship) created significant political problems and potential persecution.
3. There was some kind of disturbance in Rome (see Acts 18:2) that historians believe was connected to a rebellion. This resulted in all Jews, including Christian Jews, being banished from Rome. The question about rebellion was probably fresh in everyone's mind.
4. The Roman government was brutal and godless. The church must have been wondering about how to respond, and it seems that the issue of taxation or supporting the government financially was a front burner issue.

For all these reasons and others, Paul picks up this subject, and he calls believers to live out their Christlikeness by being submissive. The verb "be subject" means to place oneself under, to be submissive to the orders of others, to willingly follow another's instructions, or to obey. This is a common command for believers:

- Believers are to submit themselves to God (Jam. 4:7)
- We are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21)
- Church leaders are to be obeyed and submitted to because they give an account to God (Heb. 13:17)
- Wives are to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22)
- Slaves are to be submissive to their masters regardless if they are gentle or unjust (1 Pet. 2:18)
- Christians are to be subject to every human institution (1 Pet. 2:17).

Therefore, you need to know that this concept of submission or subjection is not an unfamiliar command. The overall posture of the believer is to be one of willing and joyful submission. Christlikeness is expressed very clearly in the context of our relationships with others, especially to institutions and those who are in authority. In other words, the normative pattern for the believer is one of respect, honor, and obedience.

Now that raises a series of questions that I'm sure many of you are asking: What about evil rulers and sinful governments? Are we always to obey? What about civil disobedience? Those are legitimate questions. Of course there are times when believers are required to engage in civil disobedience because we "must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29). We see examples of disobedience with the midwives (Ex. 1:15-20), Daniel (Dan. 6) and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan. 3:9-18). What's more, it was in Romans 8 that we heard about believers being "killed all the day long" (Rom. 8:36). Paul is very aware of, and he has personal experience with, bad government and civil disobedience. So there are exceptions.

But do you know what is striking here? Paul makes no qualifications and gives no exceptions in this passage, and I believe he does so because he wants believers to have a particular Christ-like attitude when it comes to the authority. Persecution may come, you may be treated unfairly, and the

government may not be on your side, but there is a warning in this text about developing a “chip on your shoulder,” becoming naturally adversarial, or being rebellious while wrapping it in Christian triumphalism.

Paul knows what he is *not* saying here. The goal of the book of Romans is not to overthrow Rome’s power. His aim is to make known the power of God through salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16), not to start a political revolution. Do revolutions happen? Yes. Is political influence, especially Christian influence, bad? By no means. But I think the point to be noted here is an important one, namely, that the Christian’s civic posture and attitude is submission because Jesus is our Lord, our citizenship is in heaven, and the gospel is our life’s mission.

Therefore, this passage invites us to do some soul-searching. In the midst of the last few years, I’ve watched as some believers have responded emotionally to the shift in our culture with anger, aggression, and almost a sense that their hearts are more attached to American citizenship than heavenly citizenship. I’ve watched some people justify less-than-Christian tones and words because of the pain of the past or because they are “fed up” with injustice or with losing the cultural war. This text calls us to remember who, as Christians, we really are.

Two Reasons:

It seems like Paul knows that his sweeping statement needs a justification and quickly. Immediately following his statement about being in subjection to the governing authorities, he gives two important reasons why this is the way that believers should live. Both concepts are rooted in who God is and what He has done.

1. Authority is God’s idea

The first point is that there is something underneath any system of government at any level. Verse 1 simply states that “there is no authority except from God.” This means that any governing entity – be it the state, the family, the courts, law enforcement – does not have its authority on its own. All earthly authorities have derivative authority. Authority belongs to God, and all authority flows from Him.

What’s more, in the same way that authority flows from God, so does morality. Courts and governments do not make something moral or immoral. God does. The government can legalize prostitution, but that does not make it moral. It could legally define marriage as between two men or two women, but that does mean that God views it as marriage. Do not confuse making something legal and making something moral. Might or authority does not make right. Power, morality, and authority are all derivatives of God’s power, morality, and authority.

This is important for two reasons. First, it is helpful so that anyone in power or exercising authority will keep in mind that while they may have power, they are not powerful in and of themselves. Understanding this helps to keep power in check. Second, it is helpful so that believers understand that by submitting to earthly authorities, they are ultimately submitting to God’s authority. Behind the authority figure, whether good or bad, is a God-designed principle of authority.

Negatively, the people who abuse their authority as well as people who are rebellious to authority figures both have a “God-problem.” Positively, people who use authority wisely and those who submit graciously contribute to something beautiful. When rulers rule with justice, when fathers lead with Christlikeness, when wives submit with respect, when children obey with joy, when police officers enforce the law fairly, when judges rule with equity, when citizens respond with respect, the culture benefits from the common grace of God’s authority.

Listen to how David, at the end of his life, said this:

² *“The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.”* ³ *The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God,* ⁴ *he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth (2 Samuel 23:2–4)*

Authority, when used properly and when responded to correctly, is a beautiful gift from the Lord.

2. Authorities are appointed by God

The second reason why authorities are to be submitted to is because they have been appointed or instituted by God. Paul moves from the general concept of authority as a gift from God to something more specific here. God has not only established the concept or the principle of authority, but He has also appointed the people and institutions.

No king or government is established apart from God’s permission and His will. Daniel 2:21 says, “he removes kings and sets up kings . . .” Therefore, both good kings and bad kings are established by God. Good governments and bad governments are established by His will. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who sacked Jerusalem, is called the servant of the Lord in Jeremiah 27:6. And there were times in Israel’s history where God established or directed wicked kings as a means of judgment (see 1 Kings 12:15).

Again, this does not answer all the questions about when not to submit.³ But as a general rule and as a guiding principle, Paul does not allow us to submit to just the principle of authority; believers are required to submit to people and institutions even though they are imperfect or even evil.

A very helpful text is 1 Peter 2:18-19, where Peter commends submission to both good and unkind masters.

¹⁸ *Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*

¹⁹ *For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. (1 Peter 2:18–19)*

³ For an excellent sermon on civil disobedience see: <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/subject-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-3>

The reason this passage is so helpful is because it helps us curtail our natural concern for our right to be treated fairly. Now at one level there is something very right about justice. But the problem is that our culture elevates our “rights” to a level that can eclipse other, more important, values. The Bible is far more concerned about sin issues like pride, rebellion, and anger than it is about the violation of our individual rights. Again, I’m not saying that there is no place for dealing with injustice as it relates to yourself or someone else. My concern, however, is how quickly we run to the problem of injustice, how quickly we seek revenge, how angry we can get when things are unfair. And yet no one goes to hell because he was treated unfairly or had his rights violated. But people do go to hell if their heart is filled with unbelieving, self-centered pride instead of trusting in Christ.

The issue that I’m driving at, and the one that I think this text is highlighting, is where your heart is as it relates to authority, authority figures, unfair treatment, or even injustice. Paul was writing to Roman Christians about Rome. He knew how this could be taken, and he offered no contextualization.

Believers are called to submit to authorities because there is something more than the principle and people involved. God is ultimately the focus of our obedience, and while there may be times when disobedience is necessary and right, the normative pattern for believers is Christ-like submission regardless if the ruler is worthy or not.

Two Implications

The rest of the text (verses 2-7) covers the implications of what Paul has stated. There are two times that the word “therefore” is used in these verses, and that is where I derive the following applications:

1. Don’t do what is wrong because of judgment

The first point is fairly straight-forward and intuitive. Paul commands believers to do what is right, and if they do not, they will incur the God-appointed judgment that will result. Authority exists as a gift from God for the punishment of evil and the protection of what is right.

Verse 2 reaffirms with different words that we talked about in verses one: authorities are appointed by God, and to resist them is to work against someone or something that God has approved. That’s not a new thought. What is new in the text is the connection to judgment. The God-appointed authority has been given more than a theoretical or philosophical power. They have the power to judge, punish, fine, and even kill. And that power is something that they have from God.

Therefore, believers ought to be motivated to not disobey the government. Instead, the believer should be motivated toward “good conduct,” and in so doing, he will be approved by the person in authority. God-appointed governing authorities have God-appointed power. So if you do not want to be afraid, and if you do not want to receive judgment, then do not do what is wrong. It’s pretty simple.

Paul pushes the point even further in verse 4 by saying that the governing authorities are actually “God’s servant for your good” and God’s “avenger.” How so? The second half of the verse tells us that God has instituted governing authorities to execute His wrath on those who do wrong. In other words, while the wrong-doer is ultimately accountable to God in eternity for what he does, there is real sense that God works in the near-term through the structures of the government. God uses the government

and anyone in authority as a means to help us do what is right and to discipline us when we succumb to self-centered actions.

There are two additional applications here that I want to make. First, if you are not a follower of Jesus, I want you think back to the last time you were “busted” for something. It could be as simple as a traffic ticket or as serious as standing in front of a judge. Do you know the fear you felt in that moment? Do you know the sense of accountability that made you very aware of what your wrong actions? Well, imagine what it would be like to stand before a judge who knows everything that you’ve done and who has the power not just to imprison but the power to damn. Earthly, governing authorities are meant to be a bit of warning as to God’s authority. Authority on earth is meant to warn you about the Judgment Day, and the gospel offers you the hope that when you stand before God, you can be forgiven because of the work of Jesus.

The other application relates to the role of government and authority. Implied in this text is the assumption that the role of biblical authority is to rule or lead in such a way that bad behavior is dealt with and good behavior is protected and affirmed. So good, fair, and morally right policies, laws, and actions are central to the God-given role of government. Authority exists to restrain evil and to facilitate good.

2. Do what’s right because it’s right

The second implication that Paul identifies here is an exhortation to do what is right, not because of external consequences, but because of your internal conscience. In other words, do what is right because it’s right. That’s the point.

Verse 5 tells believers that righteousness and Christlikeness is more than just not getting punished. Believers are exhorted to be in subjection to authorities because it is the right thing to do. Believers are to be governed not just by an external law but also by an internal law. They are to do what is right because it is right. Do more than avoid having a mug shot. Be a model citizen in all respects. Do not be a law-abiding citizen in order to earn God’s favor. Be a law-abiding citizen because of God’s favor and the flavor of Christ in you.

Paul then applies this very specifically to the issue of taxes. It must have been that this was a significant issue in Rome. It seemed to have been during the time of Jesus, since it was a question that he was directly asked in Matthew 22:15-22. The Roman government was well-known for its oppressive taxation policies, and it may have been that some Christians were “rebellious” by no longer paying taxes.

But verse 6 is very clear. When it comes to taxes “the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.” (Rom. 13:6) The IRS is a minister of God. Go figure! And how different a way to think in light of our culture.

Notice the sweeping list in verse 7:

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. Romans 13:7 (ESV)*

Do you catch the tone of this? Taxes, revenue, respect, and honor are not just things that we give. They are things that we “owe” because of the divinely ordained authority that God has established. Believers are to think differently, talk differently, act differently, pay differently, appeal differently, disagree differently, advocate differently, and basically live differently because they are living sacrifices. They are unusual people because they belong to heavenly kingdom while being model citizens in this one. They see authority as a gift from God, and they do their part to contribute to culture where people will “see their good works and glorify your Heavenly Father” (Matt. 5:16).

Pastoral Exhortations

The timing of this message, in light of what is happening, could not be more providential. How we respond to our culture is very important, and there is a great opportunity to live out a Christian mindset. Here are a few thoughts:

1. **Keep developing a Christian mindset.** You need to have a mind that is informed by biblical values and thoughts. Our culture is not neutral, and your mind will be easily and subtly captured with wrong and unbiblical thinking unless you are bringing your thoughts back to the Word of God.
2. **Set your affections on the right things.** The challenges of our present culture will have a purifying effect on the church as we are pushed to really evaluate the basis of our hope, our dreams, our purpose, and our identity. We always were exiles and sojourners (1 Peter 2:11), but we see it and feel it in a new way.
3. **Be godly.** We need people who faithfully follow Jesus in every arena of their lives. This is no time to be playing around with sinful patterns that give the world more reasons to reject the gospel. We need people who will be model citizens, model employees, model neighbors, and model spokesmen so that when we are accused of wrong-doing, people may appeal to our long-term godliness.
4. **Don't be afraid; trust in Christ.** Finally, battle through fear that could lead you to worry, have sinful anger or commit actions that you regret. Remember that our King is seated at the right hand of God. One day He will return, and on that day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Our trust, our hope, and our confidence is in Him – the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

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