

Romans 13:1-7 Let's Be Good Citizens, 2/28/21

Well there you have it, the Bible says submit...let's close in prayer. I can't think of any reason why anyone would be uncomfortable or opinionated about the role of the government, religious rights and politics. Now our study in Romans has already caused us to kick the hornet's nest a bit hasn't it? Big theological issues like predestination and freewill, before Missions Month we addressed the virus of contempt we have seen in our country. And now this subject... It's like Paul is bound and determined to fill up my inbox this week! But ultimately God's Words so if you take issue with something we read here, instead of filling my inbox, can you message him directly after the sermon, please? PRAY.

Now if you have been tracking with us in this series, the topic of government may seem a bit random, but actually I believe it is the natural progression from Paul's instructions in Romans 12. Our only reasonable response to the incredible mercy and grace of the gospel is whole-life surrender in worship to God. This vertical response leads to a horizontal response- love, honor and service to one another- both our friends and church, but even our enemies, the other tribe, those who have a completely different worldview than you, who may be actively attempting to undermine your way of life, even persecuting you. And it's in this vein Paul brings up the governing authorities.

I believe there are two primary connections to the end of chapter. 12:19 "Leave vengeance to God." One of the ways, though not the ultimate way, that God executes vengeance and justice is through the hand of the government which Paul will say explicitly in our text today. The second connection is Paul's instructions to "bless those who curse you and persecute you"- well in Paul's day a primary source of cursing and persecution were the governing authorities. When Paul wrote these things, none of the governing authorities were Christian. "The 'authorities' he is referring to were at best unfriendly, and at worst actively hostile toward the church. Paul would not have approved of or endorsed the vast majority of what the governing leaders of his day did and had there been a free election he might not have voted for any of them. You think many of our leaders are bad and unqualified? How about **Caligula**, who ruled during Paul's lifetime, As one author said, "was unfit to keep a pet, let alone run an empire."¹ He had his mother and brother killed off to make sure they didn't challenge his thrown. He committed incest with three of his sisters. He had the heads of statues of deities removed--and replaced them a bust of his own. He installed his favorite horse as a senator and then promoted him later to consul. Bringing new meaning to voting yay or neigh... Bottom line, these are no Abe Lincolns, they aren't even Nixons. It is into this context that Paul says, "Be subject to the governing authorities and honor them."

Learn Two Things:

First- **The Responsibilities of the State. Responsibilities of Citizens**

The Responsibilities of the State.

¹ JD Greear quote from Romans 13 sermon.

1. To punish the bad.

Romans 13:4 *For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason.*

They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

The government bears the responsibility, as God's servants, to punish those who do evil, or to put it positively, to protect its citizens from enemies, and to maintain law and order. Now when Paul says they bear the sword- he is at least saying the government has been give the authority of capital punishment, although this passage certainly does not tell us the ins and outs of when, how, why and if necessary. This isn't his main point and so it won't be mine either. But most theologians would agree that "the sword" here encompasses the power to punish those who do wrong which may be fines, imprisonment, death, etc.² Now notice, that's the government's job not the job of the citizens. Imagine how chaotic it would be if every citizen bore the power of the sword. Though we have the right to bear arms, we do not have the Biblical right to be Batman- vigilantes taking vengeance in our own hands. Not our job.

When they bear the sword, it is ultimately God's sword that they bear. They are, vs. 3 says, God's servants in doing so. And so they should do that with diligence, wisdom and justice. When governments allow injustice to thrive, for the strong to trample over the weak-whether that is a criminal with citizens, or the cause of the immigrant in the courts; prejudicial housing systems; the unborn in the womb; a predatory lender with the elderly; or a hundred other injustices- when they allow those things to go unpunished, they are failing at their God-given jobs and they are accountable to God, who judges those in leadership more strictly.³

2. To Promote the Good.

Romans 13:3-4a ³*For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?*

Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴For the one in authority is God's servant for your good.

Paul is not intending to lay out an exhaustive political philosophy, but one of the government's jobs is to promote the good, to recognize those who are working for the general welfare of their citizens. That's certainly how healthy governments have seen themselves throughout history. This is in our own **constitution**- "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

² Tim Keller, *Romans for You*.

³ JD Greear in Sermon

This is not all the government should do, this isn't Paul's main point- But the government certainly shouldn't do less than this. **Responsibilities of the state. The Responsibilities of Citizens**

1. Work for the Good of the State.

Romans 13:3 *For rulers hold no terror for those who do good works, but for those who do evil.*

Jeremiah 29:7 *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

This marked the early church. The early church had a reputation for sacrificial living, being about the welfare of the community. They won people over displaying the gospel in their life. They had no power and influence through politics. Instead, they fought against child abandonment and infanticide through fostering and adopting discarded children. They fought against classism and racism through creating a new equality within the church where Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freedman served side-by-side. They fought against hunger by feeding the poor. They fought against healthcare inequality by taking care of the sick and serving the widows. John Piper- "The authors of scripture were much more focused on our service, mission, devotion, submission, endurance, and sanctification, [than political influence]."

The defining orientation of the church in the Roman world was service to the community and subversion of Caesar's gospel by preaching the good news of Jesus."⁴

We should be known for our good works, serving those in need in our community so that those who govern, even if they disagree with our beliefs, consider us a blessing and a partner for the good of our community. How are you working for the good of our state? Think provincially- Individually (school boards, PTAs, volunteering childrens hospital, shelters, and corporately- Love-in-action, ESL, addiction recovery, financial peace, counseling, Preschool early childhood education, diaper drive, community day serve the city.

2. Submit in attitude and action.

Romans 13:1-2

¹*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

²*Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*

Paul isn't just telling to that we should submit, but WHY. We submit not only because the authorities can make our lives miserable if we don't, but out of reverence for God for what He has ordained. Daniel 4:17 says that God rules over all human governments and gives them to

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/subjection-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-2>

anyone he wishes. And so we must submit in recognition of the role God has given the state. That means you obey them whether you think you'll get caught or not. I've heard some Christians say, "Oh, I don't worry about that on my taxes--b/c the government has no way of knowing about that income." Brothers and sisters, we don't tell the truth to the government because we might get caught; we do so because we worship a God of truth, and we fill out our taxes as an act of worship to God who sees everything. "Oh Pastor, why did you need to say that right before I file my taxes!" Don't shoot the messenger!

But there is also a really practical reason we submit as well. ⁶ *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.*

We submit to taxes because someone has to do the hard work of governing. I know we tend to focus on the negative stuff that the government does...but regardless of political party the leader belongs to, they provide things we are all very grateful for- The roads we drive on, services like 911 and policing, courts, international trade agreements, national defense, etc.

Now submission is not new- The Bible calls us to a heart posture of submission to church leaders, in marriage, for children with their parents, and to one another. Now we don't like this do we? We tend to think of the word submission as a bad word, or think submission means subjugation or being a doormat. And the abuses of this authority in the home or in the church or in the workplace are a mile wide. We are living in the aftershock of the fall of Ravi Zacharias who was found to have used his power to abuse women with little to no accountability. There are good reasons we balk at this idea of submission. I get it, we all want to immediately go to the exceptions, don't we? But what about...?? We will get there, but the first and foundational truth for us is that God wants his church to err on the side of a submissive heart posture⁵, not a hostile heart position, assuming the worst, ready to believe every conspiracy theory, and raring for a fight. Why? Ultimately- this is the posture of the heart of Christ. Who Philippians 2- humbled himself, gave up his rights and submitted to the will of God so that we could be forgiven.

3. Show Honor

⁷ *Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

For most of us, it will be relatively easy to pay taxes and tolls although *DE turnpike top five most expensive per mile, but Paul here talks about more than that. We are to treat those in authority with respect and honor. I spent considerable time with this point in my message on honor and contempt Jan 31, so I'll say this briefly. We have lost the art of honor in America, and sometimes religious people can be the worst offenders, because it hides behind piety. But Christians of all people should show honor to those in authority. How about something as simple as instead of saying Biden- President Biden. When you disagree or have legitimate criticism in the public square of a government leader- can you also highlight things that you can complement and honor? Always honor the office. What about how you talk about political

⁵ Wording from <https://bayviewguam.com/a-word-from-pastor-on-civil-obedience-disobedience/>

leaders in your home? Is it often with sarcasm, disrespect and condemnation? Even in critique, is it with an attitude of respect, recognition of the impossibly hard job political leaders have, and with praying for our leaders. So much is caught more than taught. And then we wonder why there isn't more respect for those in authority among young people. I don't see anywhere in Paul's letters he signs off with #notmycaesar. Let's set the bar for honor.

4. Don't Freak Out. [With Scripture] Or... Moderate your expectations.

This whole passage is built on the assumption that government's role is very limited, and can only do so much because God is the ultimate authority. Our ultimate hope is never in government. Don't put your trust in princes who cannot save the psalmist says. Even the best of human governments are a temporary, imperfect fill-in for God, and none of them fulfill that vision of a "more perfect union" for which we long. "Our hope is not in politics, because we know that salvation didn't come to earth riding in on the wings of AF1 but cradled in a manger. Our hope is not in a donkey or an elephant but the Lamb."⁶ And that means our primary work here is not in politics. Yes, be involved. Vote. Where you can, speak truth with honor to the powers that be. And, some of you should go into politics and make it your profession. But our primary work is in the kingdom of God through the church. The work of the gospel in the world is 10,000x more important than the headlines of the Washington Post.

Blank Slide Some of us think you can only really thrive when "your people" are in power. And you are distressed and all "woe is me" and "what are we going to do" and "what kind of country will this be for my kids to grow up in" when your guy is not in power. Let me tell you: The early church *never* had the privilege of having their guy in power. They got on their faces and said, 'Oh, sovereign God, who created the heavens and earth" and the Holy Spirit shook the room where they praying. Friends- "Our guy" is ALWAYS in power.

Power is temporary- our tour group in Jerusalem went onto the temple mount, to the exact place where Jesus was sentenced to death at the hands of the Roman powers and began his walk to calvary to be crucified. For the authorities, this was just one more insignificant insurrectionist sentenced to die at the powerful hands of the empire...and yet the Roman empire is now rubble, ancient history, and has been for centuries...and in that very spot Jesus was sentenced hundreds of thousands of Christians have proclaimed Jesus as Lord and his kingdom continues to expand to all corners of the earth. So- don't freak out. We should have calm, quiet confidence, even in political activism because we know our guy is always in power.

OK fine- Service, Submit, Honor, don't freak out. Got it...but should we just let the government do whatever they want? Trample our freedoms? Create unjust laws? Redefine morality? Overreach their power in our religious rights? Does the government have any authority to tell the church if, when and how they can gather to worship? When is civil disobedience justified? Wow, these are great questions and you will just have to wait until next week to hear what the Bible says about these questions.

⁶ JD Greear Quote