



Submitting to Authority

Romans 13:1-7

Rev. Fred Greco

We'll be in this passage this week and next week. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 13, beginning at verse 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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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, 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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that you would not only, Lord, grant it to us to understand your Word but that you would empower us to obey it, that we would heed your commands, and that we would do your will. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We have finally moved on from chapter 12, but we are not moving out of the practical realm. Paul is still giving us instruction on how to live the Christian life. He is moving on to an important and a difficult matter: government, authority, and the Christian. Today we will look at why Paul chooses to address government here in the book of Romans. Then we will see the foundational principle that God has established government. Next week, we will see how the Christian is to respond, but we can only rightly understand our response if we first see God at work.

So, we come to this text that is a bit controversial. We're not exactly in the election time of year. There are still a few months until November, although it seems now to me that the election season is now year-round, decade-round. It seems there is always an election before us. The day after an election is held, the campaigns begin for the next session. So this is an important thing for us to see: God's perspective on government.

This morning, I'd like us to look at two aspects of this passage. First, we need to see the preliminary considerations that give context to this passage. Then secondly, we need to see the foundational principle that government is of God. Government comes from God. Let's start by looking at the preliminary considerations that will help us as we seek to understand and obey this passage.

Preliminary Considerations

The first question we would ask is... *Why is this here?* Why does Paul take up the subject of government here? After all, this is a controversial passage. It's not just controversial *in* its content. It's controversial *because of* its content. It's not just the fact that we're not sure what it says, but it's controversial in the fact that it even exists at this spot in the book of Romans.

For example, many commentators see this as an interruption into the flow of Paul's letter. They wonder why Paul turns to an earthly focus here when he has been discussing spiritual things, like the law of love, both in chapter 12 and in what follows in chapter 13. Why does he turn now to the Christian's duty about earthly things? There are others who point out that Jesus' name does not even appear in this passage, as if somehow that means the passage is unimportant or that it's not genuine.

This is what people do. They come to a passage they don't want to deal with, that they don't want to obey, and they find reasons to take it out of your Bible. This is an important lesson for us about the Bible. Those who want to attack the authority of the Bible will use any means at their disposal. People who do not believe in Jesus and do not believe in his claims will suddenly be concerned that he's not mentioned enough in a passage.

People will decide that Paul should have thought a certain way, and they will use that as proof that a portion of Scripture is fake, that Paul never wrote it, for example. Then, of course, there are people who decide what God *should* be concerned about. When the Bible speaks to something else, then they use that to prove that a portion of the Bible is unimportant, because it doesn't deal with things, according to them, that God should be dealing with.

In all of this, there is one common theme, and that is a rejection of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. When arguments are made that you should ignore a portion of the Bible, you need to look first at the principles. Is there an authority that is being set up above the Bible? Is God being told what he can and can't say or even what he would and wouldn't say? If that is the case, then you need to reject these arguments. They stand on faulty ground. They are attacking the ground of the inspiration and the authority of the Scriptures.

If we are to submit ourselves to the authority of the Bible, we must not go looking for ways to reject portions of it. It is an undeniable truth that as soon as you begin to take anything out of the Bible, anything goes. There is no stopping what comes out, because you have just placed yourself as an authority over the Bible. Instead, what we are to do is to try to see what the Holy Spirit is telling us and *why* he's telling that to us in this particular place.

This is especially important when we come to sections of the Bible that challenge us, because it is far too easy to simply say, "Well, of course the Bible can't mean *that*" or "I can't believe God would actually say *that*." Therefore, we dismiss what God is saying to us. Now, this does not mean we check our reason at the door. We *are* to be thinking Christians. After all, the Bible is God's Word. That means God is communicating to us in a reasonable, logical fashion. God wants us to understand what he's saying, and he uses reason to do that.

The Bible is not a series of disconnected statements we jump to hope to find the answer to a question. Too many Christians view the entirety of the Bible as kind of a giant book of proverbs, pithy statements that are scattered throughout in which you leap to one and then the other to find an answer to a question you might have. You don't

need to know the context. You don't need to know what the author is doing or what has come before. Instead, you just simply leap to find an answer to an intriguing question.

This is especially important here in chapter 13, because for many people, this passage is a detached, go-to passage to answer questions about civil government. It's as if you could understand this passage completely apart from its context, which is, of course, not the case, because Paul did not drop this from heaven. Paul writes this in the middle of a letter that he is sending to a church at *this* point in *this* place with *this* context.

So then the question comes... *Why does Paul bring this subject up now?* Well, I think, first, it fits the context. Dealing with government is not artificial at this point. It is not as if Paul is interrupting his train of thought or forcing this subject upon us. If we see this great truth, it will help us to understand the Christian's relationship to government.

Our relationship with government and our dealing with government is a part of obeying the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Do you remember that back in Romans, chapter 12, verses 1 and 2? Paul told us that is what we are to do. This follows in that vein. Our obedience, our obligation to government falls within the Christian's obedience to God's will. Christians are transformed by the renewing of their mind, but that transformation does not do away with the world.

I imagine that yesterday you ate, and I imagine that today you'll have something to drink, and I daresay that this evening you will go to sleep. You are not somehow removed from the reality of the world. Just because you are a Christian does not mean you do not live in the world, that you do not have practical matters that come before you. As we look at this subject, we have to understand that the transformation of the Christian does not transport him *out* of the world, but rather, it transforms him to live in the world as a child of God. That's an important point.

Paul also brings this up now because it meets the immediate context: How do we live peaceably with others and not take vengeance? This was the end of chapter 12. Paul told us we are not to take vengeance but, rather, to leave it to the Lord, because "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord. But God's enacting of justice, his vengeance, does not only happen in the end times. It certainly *does* happen at the end of all history, but God also uses his providence in the world today. He doesn't wait to right all wrongs until the end of all time. This context helps us to understand our passage.

We also need to see that it fits a need Paul would have in discussing this with the church at Rome. The immediate need Paul has is to show one way that God is active in the world, but that is also contextual. He's speaking to the church at Rome that we have seen before is made up of Gentiles and Jews. It was situated in the heart of the Roman Empire. You might think of Rome as sort of a combination...New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington DC rolled into one. It was the heart of the empire. It was where all the power resided and emanated out from.

It was also the largest city. It was significant, and the church is there right at the heart of the empire. Now, the Jews at this time were notoriously known as bad citizens. That's because the Jews had taken God's injunction in Deuteronomy 17 to not place a foreigner over them as a king to mean the Jews could never be ruled by anyone who wasn't a Jew. Therefore, they viewed as completely illegitimate any authority over them that wasn't Jewish.

They thought they did not have to obey the laws, that they didn't have to listen to the king, that they didn't have to listen to the authorities, because it wasn't Jewish.

As we step back and look at their interpretation of this passage, Deuteronomy 17, in light of history, we see that this doesn't make sense. After all, God took the Jews out from the land and put them under foreign authorities. The Bible is very clear that that was the action of God. It was not a mistake. It was not a happenstance. They came under the Babylonians because God *put* them under the Babylonians, and God, through the prophet Jeremiah, told them they were to seek the welfare of the city where they were, that they were to be good citizens.

As we come to the time of the rule of Rome, God has placed the Jews under Roman rule. His providence rules. Again, this is not an accident. What we have here is Paul needing to give direction to Christians who might be tempted to follow in the same path as the Jews to be the worst of all citizens in a kingdom or an empire. Instead, Paul wants to counteract this. He wants us to know, as Christians, that we can and we *should* be the best of all citizens in a state. That's why this is here.

The second question we must consider is... *What does this tell us?* What is this passage telling us? There is a very practical point to be made that the Christian is not exempt from this world. I know that sometimes, if you're like me, you wish you could just make the world fly away, that all of the problems that surround us, with jobs and finances and recessions and wars and weather extremes, would all just go away and we could just live a peaceful, tranquil life in Christ.

Well, the reality of the situation is that's not where the Lord has placed you. That's not where the Lord has placed *me*. We are here at *this* place at *this* time in *this* nation because of the providential will of God. So, it is a temptation both common to the Christians in Rome and to Christians in *our* day to say that because a Christian is a citizen of heaven believers should have nothing to do with the world, that we should stay as far away from the world as we can, that we shouldn't watch the news, that we shouldn't be involved in government, that we shouldn't be involved in our society, that we should be as separate as possible from the world.

There's also a temptation (because, as Christians, we are to look to eternal things, to the return of Jesus Christ, to the end of all history) to think about the fact that the history of the world is coming to an end and, therefore, we shouldn't care about it. Perhaps the most famous way this has been expressed is that Christians should not have any involvement at all in any civil matters because you don't "polish brass on a sinking ship."

There is a theological point here Paul is trying to make to us. That point is that the gospel works in every circumstance and place. It works under every government. This is a powerful encouragement to you and to me. It tells us that nothing in the world can stop the gospel...not monarchies, not socialism, not communism, not dictatorships, not democracy, not plutocracy, not media-driven matters. Nothing can stop the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing can stop you from living the gospel life.

Remember that Paul is telling Christians in Rome to live the gospel life in a totalitarian state. Rome was just as totalitarian as the Soviet Union or any other dictatorship. There were some of the trappings of laws and legality, but basically, the emperor's word was law. We see this throughout history, because there were more than a few

emperors who went crazy. Perhaps most famously, one emperor admitted his horse to the senate. No one stopped him, because they knew to say something even as common sense as, "A horse can't be a senator" would mean they would lose their head. That's a totalitarian state.

So Paul takes up this subject for us. It is important, and it is one of the most difficult things we have to face. How can we, as Christians, live a holy life in an unholy state? What Paul does is he gives us biblical principles as to how to live in the order of this world. This is extremely practical for most of the world's Christians. It is not theoretical. For most of the world's Christians, they live without any of the freedoms we enjoy and take for granted every single day...the rule of law, freedom of worship, representation before a judge. Most of the world does not enjoy any of these freedoms.

So it's not surprising that most Christians come to this passage and find it helpful and comforting. When I was teaching in China, by far and away these sorts of questions were the most common I received. I could be teaching on covenant theology or on Presbyterian government or on baptism, and it would not matter. When the time came for questions, they all revolved around, "How do we live as Christians when we have a government that persecutes us? What do we do for our children? How can the church in America help relieve the burden we're under?"

You see, for most of the world, this is their everyday experience. It's not theoretical. So if we don't think this passage is important, it's likely because we don't experience real persecution. Now we may complain. Don't we? We have plenty to complain about, but we're not in the same circumstances as other Christians in the Sudan, in India, in Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia.

It is important for us to see what Paul is *not* telling us. As Americans, we come to this text, and we want Paul to speak *to* our government. We want Paul to give us a treatise on what good government is and how government can be good. We want Paul to teach and instruct our government, but that's not what Paul is doing. Paul's focus here is to tell Christians how they are to respond to government no matter what kind of government it is. We have to keep these important considerations in mind as we look at the text.

Government is of God

Let's begin, then, and look at chapter 13, verse 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." Before we get to Paul's command (we're going to look at that next week), we will start with his foundation *for* the command, that government is of God, that God is the one who has given us government.

Paul actually starts verse 1 with a command to us, but he quickly establishes why we should obey this particular command. It is rooted in the fact that government comes from God. Christians are to have a certain relationship to government. Paul tells us the reason that is so is because government has a certain relationship to God.

Paul knows the subject of government is easily abused. There were and *are* some who treat government like a deity, as if it is supreme and can do whatever it wants. Rulers act like they are gods themselves. Perhaps the best example of this in the Bible is Pharaoh. He literally did believe he was a god. He thought everything he said must be obeyed because he was a god. He thought his power to rule came from the fact that he was a god.

A bit more modern, although still some centuries old, example of this would be Louis XIV. One of his famous quotes is that he said, "I am the state." The context was people were saying to him, "We need to be thinking about how France will do something, how we will enter into wars or make taxation, how we will do what we will do to rule and to lead," and his response was, "There is no France; there is me. I am the state. I am France. Whatever I say is what goes." It's that same principle of government being like a deity.

Others go to an opposite extreme. They view all government as illegitimate, as if there is no reason to submit to *any* government. Both of these views are false if we understand the foundation of government. Where does government come from? Some see it as a bare will to power. That is, whoever is the strongest or the wealthiest simply takes advantage of others in society. There's no rhyme or reason beyond that. Others view government as a kind of social contract. Unless people consent to be governed, government cannot and should not exist.

Both of these views, although they're very different, share one commonality: that government is solely created by people, and that is a false view of government. Paul's view is very different. Paul tells us that all government comes from God. Do you see what he says in verse 1? "There is no authority except from God." Every authority there is comes from God. There's no exception. He doesn't say, "Every *good* authority" or "No *bad* authority." No. He is comprehensive.

This can be difficult for us to understand, because so much of what we see of governments in the world are against God. Think about China. Think about Muslim nations. They are opposed to the church and the gospel and the people of God. Even here in the United States we see the government attack Christians and the church. So how could it be that God is the one behind government? Paul is clear here. It's not just *some* government. It's not just *good* government. It's not just *Christian* government. *All* government comes from God.

He puts it in two ways. First, all authority is from God, and secondly, every government that exists has been instituted by God. First, when Paul writes about the authority that is from God, he means more than power. He means legitimate command exercised by government. God has established legitimate authority on earth, and that is government. So government is a gift from God. Yes, it is. You believe me, don't you? Because it comes from God's Word.

Again, it's easy to complain about government. After all, there is so much to complain about, but think about what your life would be like without any government. It would either be chaos or it would be the rule of illegitimate power and might only. Paul is very clear here. He could have chosen to use the Greek word for *power*. There is a perfectly good word to describe power and might and authority in that sense, but Paul intentionally does not use that word. He uses a word that means authority, organization. It implies legitimacy.

Paul is not saying that any old power is government. He's saying there are authorities established by God for governing, and he wants us to see that God has created authority on earth for our benefit. In fact, our greatest complaints against the government are when the government acts contrary to its authority and uses raw power instead. Isn't that true? We acknowledge that without a legitimate authority we would be in a very bad way.

The second thing Paul reminds us is that those authorities that actually *do* exist have been instituted by God. Again, this is not a theoretical exercise. Paul is not writing a treatise on government. He says all of those governments you see are instituted by God. Now this means it is not just that they happen to come about or exist. It's not as if God is asleep at the switch or they slip through his fingers and, somehow, they establish themselves and God has to play catch-up. No.

When Paul says God has instituted all authorities that exist, the word *instituted* means to direct, to appoint, to set up, to set in order. We have to understand that God in his sovereignty and providence establishes governments. To deny that would be to deny an attribute of God, that he is sovereign, that he governs all things. Therefore, we must acknowledge that government itself is not evil. It is not best to be done away with. That doesn't mean everything government does is right or good, but we must see that government has been given to us by God.

So, the next question that comes to us is... *Why has God given government?* What is his purpose? If government doesn't exist apart from God, we must see that government's purpose is not distinct or apart from *God's* purpose. They go together. Again, this is easy to miss because of sin. Sin causes governments to act in ways contrary to God's purpose, just as it does for individuals. This is no surprise, because governments are made up of individuals.

Just as individuals sin and live contrary to God's purpose and rebel against God, so governments can do this as well. This does not mean God does not have an overarching principle for government. His overarching purpose for government is the executing of his providence in the world. Perhaps the best short definition of the providence of God is found in the answer to *Westminster Shorter Catechism* question 11: "God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions."

Do you hear the comprehensiveness of that definition? What is outside of the providence of God? Is it any creature in all of creation? No. Is it any action of any creature in all of creation? No. All come under the providence of God. So the minute we say government is independent of God or that it is outside the purpose of God, we say something about God that is untrue. We should be far more concerned to be speaking truth about God than about defining government in a way that makes us comfortable.

If God does not have a purpose for government, then his arm is indeed short. His providence has limits. He is not in control of all things. So Paul tells us that God has appointed rulers to carry out his providence. Look at verse 2. "Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Whatever government you are under, God has not lost control. We must not act like he has.

"But," you say, "you don't know my situation. My government is wicked. It treats me unjustly. It does wrong things to me. I can give you example after example of how the government does things wrong." Please, you don't need to do that. I see enough of that on Facebook every day. You can keep the details and the examples, the particulars, to yourself, because I will agree with you that government does horrible things, that it doesn't always follow God's Word, but what I know is that the Bible says that does not matter for the general principle Paul is making here.

Now how do I know that? I know that because of the example of Jesus. Jesus went before a corrupt and a wrong government. He was wrongly accused, and the government unjustly punished him because it wanted popularity, because it wanted to show its control was more important than justice. All we need to do is to go and look at the story of Jesus and Pilate. Did Jesus tell Pilate his authority was illegitimate? Did Jesus say Pilate had *no* authority?

Did Jesus say, "I'm walking out of here because I don't recognize you, because your government is unjust and not good"? No, of course not. Listen to what Jesus actually said in John, chapter 19, verse 11. "Jesus answered him, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.'" Do you hear that? Jesus tells Pilate he has authority over him. How can that be? Jesus is God. He's the one who spun the universe into existence. He is without beginning and without end. He is perfect in every way.

How could a fool like Pilate possibly have authority over Jesus? Because Jesus is the God-man. He is the Messiah. He was born in a specific time at a specific place under a specific government. As such, that government had authority over him. It wasn't because Pilate was brilliant. It wasn't because Pilate did the right thing. It wasn't even because Pilate was just. We know he was *unjust*. It was because God had given that authority to Pilate.

You say, "How can that possibly be, Pastor? How can I possibly live with this?" I want to remind you of something. You're not the only one who has to obey God. There's a biblical principle. "To whom much is given much is expected." So government needs to answer to God. Not to you, not to me, not to the press. Government needs to answer to *God* for the way in which they carry out their authority. I don't know about you, but just thinking about that makes me think I don't ever want to be a part of any government anywhere anytime, to have to face that standard.

How can Jesus accept the authority of Pilate? How can I call *you* to do that, to accept that God has a purpose even for government? What it requires is for you to look beyond government to God's rule. You are to submit yourself to the providence of God. He has created government. He has a purpose for it. Does that mean everything will go well? Of course not. We live in a world that is filled with sin, a world in rebellion against God, so we should expect persecution. Paul has been telling us this over and over again, that that is part and parcel of the Christian life. The government we have is not the government that determines your life. The government may think that's the case. *You* may even be tempted to think that's the case, but that's not true, Paul says. You have to look past government to the one who created government.

In conclusion, do you see God in the establishment of government? Do you see God in *your* government? If you don't, what does that say about you? You are called to live every aspect of your life in subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what Paul told us in Romans 12:1-2: our lives are to be in subjection to Jesus as a consequence of the great salvation he has given to us. You do yourself no favor by trying to box off a portion of your life from God. God doesn't need your help. He doesn't need to be rescued from the fact of sinful or wicked governments. He is using *all* governments, even those that are wicked and sinful, to fulfill *his* purpose. Part of that purpose is to make his children into the image of Jesus Christ. We've already seen how Jesus responded to unjust government. Next week, we will look at *our* responsibility to respond to government. May the Lord give us the grace we need to obey his commands and to be salt and light in the world.