

The Necessity and Glory of Submission

Romans 13:1-2,5; 1 Peter 2:13-25; Hebrews 13:17

Intro: Over the past 26 years of my ministry at Harvest Church, there have been only a few times where I have felt the need to address a specific issue or topic. I do so this morning – not with trepidation but with anticipation. One of the wonderful things about being a Pastor is that God promises that as we open His Word and apply that Word to our lives God will do His work. This Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, uniquely designed for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Last Sunday, in Paul's letter to the Galatians, we saw that the unity of the church was being imperiled. There was a division in the body. But Paul was able to heal that rift and restore the unity of the church by simply calling the church back to the truth of the gospel, the truth of God's Word. God's Word has that same power today. As we submit together to God's instruction and God's truth, we are going to be united.

We currently have a dispute in the body. The elders of Harvest church have made a decision concerning Covid-19 protocols, and some of you are struggling with that decision. Let me say, right at the beginning that that's ok. For those of you who have written letters to the Session I want to thank you for that. I know that's not an easy thing to do, but your love for the church and your desire for truth and peace are deeply appreciated.

This has not been an easy year, and God does not promise to make the coming year any easier. But God has good purposes in His providences. What is God doing in our lives and in His church through this? He's teaching us to depend on Him. He's teaching us to be patient with one another. And I believe He's teaching us lessons in submission.

One of the issues we are facing in a unique way over these past months is the appropriate Christian response to governing authorities. While I won't be able to address every question you may have or every specific circumstance we face – my goal this morning is to simply establish, from God's Word, a guiding principle. God hasn't brought us here by accident and He promises to lead us as we look to His Word.

I strongly encourage you to have your Bible open this morning so that you can see the words for yourself as we move through these texts.

I. The Necessity of Submission

Romans 13:1–2, 5 “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. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment....⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

The book of Romans is Paul’s magisterial declaration of the gospel! Paul unfolds the wonders of the gospel in chapters 1-8. He then speaks of God’s sovereign purposes in chapters 9-11. And then, beginning in chapter 12 Paul calls us to live “in view of God’s mercies”. What does it look like to walk in view of all that God has so gloriously done for us and promised to us in Jesus Christ?

And that’s the context for Romans 13. This chapter is about the calling God’s people have, in view of the mercy they have received, to live in this fallen world under God’s authority exercised through governing bodies. The first sentence explains the primary principle.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”

I invite you to notice several things us in this passage.

1. The **universal nature** of this charge. “Every person” - believer and unbeliever, Jew and Gentile, man, woman, child, slave or free.

2. The **strength** of the charge – “*be subject to*”. The word literally means, “to place yourself under”. It means to “*submit to the order or directives of someone; to obey.*” It’s the same word used to describe Jesus’s relationship to his parents in Luke 2:51.

“And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.”

It’s the same word used in Hebrews 13:17 concerning elders of the church.

Hebrews 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them....”

Same word. Same concept.

3. The **object** of submission, those we are commanded to submit to are the “governing authorities”. Rome was big on governing authorities. The Emperor ruled, of course, but his governing power was exercised through many layers of governmental oversight including consuls, tribunals, magistrates and governors and so forth. These are the people Paul has in mind.

4. The **reason** attached to the command.

“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

God has woven institutions of authority in both the home and the church and civic society. This is a good part of His creation. The authority of rulers and parents and elders comes from Him and is actually His authority.

I think we tend to forget that here in America. We believe that governing authorities, fundamentally, are instituted by the people and for the people. We need to keep in mind that, while we have a Constitution, the authority of our elected official does not ultimately come from man but from God. The authority of our Governor has been instituted by God.

Which is why disobedience is a big deal.

5. The **penalty** attached to the command.

²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment

Two things we need to see here:

First, Paul wants to make clear what we are doing when we resist governing authorities. We are not simply resisting a governing authority; we are resisting the God who appointed them.

Secondly, Paul wants to make clear what failure to submission produces.

“Those who resist will incur judgement.”

There are three “Judgements” Paul has in mind.

- The judgement of the governing authority (vs 4).
- The judgement of God.
- The judgement of your own conscience.

:5 “Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”

The “sake of conscience” language here is important. It means that when we resist those God has placed over us, we are sinning, and our conscience is stained.

Let me just say that this has been an overwhelming motive for the Sessions decisions. We believe these verses apply to this situation. That’s why we are trying to walk a line that both honors the Governors orders and that allows us to worship and move

forward in gospel ministry. We aren't going to walk that line with perfect consistency. But this is our desire and we believe this text brings clarity in a world of confusion.

There is so much confusion out there about the virus itself, about how dangerous it is, what is effective prevention. There are huge disagreements concerning the effectiveness and wisdom of our Governors decisions. But here is one principle from God that is perfectly clear and that should be a unifying principle for God's people. God expects us to submit to governing authority – even when we disagree with them. The Session believes, at this point, that Romans 13 applies to our current context.

So, God's word to us in Romans 13 is a strong word. It's a very specific and relevant word. We can't say, "Well, we don't do things that way in America." It is true that God has blessed us with a wonderful Constitution and rule of law. And those laws give us the right to vote, the right to appeal, the right to sign petitions and even go to court if we feel the government is not acting in accord with what is right and just. But the rule of God's Word stands.

Paul Carter, "The general rule is thus firmly established: Christians are to be subject to their governing authorities. They are to respect the authority of the civil magistrate. They are to pay what taxes are required. They are to show appropriate honor to persons in positions of authority. We do this not because they are good, but because God is good and authority is part of his creation and design."

Of course, there are exceptions. We have the right and even obligation to disobey the government when the government is requiring us to violate a clear command of God – like the Hebrew mid-wives of Exodus 1 refusing to obey Pharaoh's orders to kill Hebrew male babies. We also have the example of the Apostles in Acts 5. When the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop preaching, Peter says, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Jesus had commanded them to preach – and Jesus trumps the Sanhedrin.

Paul Carter: "Thus we have a recognized exception to the general rule: If the government forbids us to do that which God commands, or requires us to do that which God forbids, we must obey God rather than men."

While Paul establishes the necessity of submission, Peter shows the glory of it!

II. The Glory

1 Peter 2:13–17 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by

doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

The context of Peter's command is very similar to what we saw in the book of Romans. Peter begins his letter by reminding the believers of their incredible privileges as the children of God (1:3-7). He reminds them of who they are in Christ in 2:9-10.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

This is their identity. Now how will they live out that identity in the world?? In verses 13 and 14 Peter repeats what Paul had said in Romans 13.

¹³Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution.....

But Peter adds some wonderful gospel incentives to encourage us to happily pursue this good work of submission.

1. Submission is a Spiritual Weapon.

:15 *"For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should silence the ignorance of foolish people."* The enemies of the church and of the gospel were charging God's people with being disobedient to governing authorities. They were charged with rejecting Caesar's authority as they swore fealty to King Jesus. But Peter says the way to silence such foolish talk is to be conspicuous in submission to every human institution. It is God's will that we should silence the enemies of God and His church by submission! Submission is a spiritual weapon for the glory of God.

2. Submission is an Exercise of Christian Freedom

There is a critical thought here that we must not miss. In verse 16 Peter says,

"Live as people who are free...".

Well, that sounds good. It sounds positively American! We like the idea of living free from the tyranny of government authorities. But notice that the freedom Peter has in mind is NOT the freedom *from* governing authorities but the freedom to be *subject* to them!

The unique freedom of a child of God is not the freedom to protest. Anyone can do that. And there may be times and place where that is appropriate – but that isn't the freedom Christ purchased for you on the cross. The freedom Christ purchased for you on the cross is the freedom to submit to ruling authorities as the Lord's servant and for the Lord's sake.

But what about when the ruling authority over us is harsh or unjust? Do we still need to submit to them?? Well Peter knows where your mind is going and addresses that immediately in verse 18-19.

2:18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

That's a startling statement for American ears. But Peter couldn't be clearer.

"Servants be subject to your masters – even when they are unjust!" (Crooked, harsh, not right). The idea is that the master is not ruling as he ought. There are valid reasons to disagree. But Peter calls servants to be marked by submission.

Let's just be honest here and admit we are not very good at submission. I didn't get into fights much in school. I just never saw the point of them and it looked painful. But I clearly remember a day, in my 20's when I went after my foreman at Dykema Excavating because he was treating us like dogs and I'd had it. Something within us just boils up when we think we are being dealt with unfairly or harshly. Some of you are deeply concerned about what's happening to our country and specifically the actions of our Governor. I understand. But take a moment to put yourself in the shoes of the first century church – the people Peter is talking to. They were experiencing truly harsh treatment from the governing authorities. They were having their property confiscated, their rights abrogated. They were being persecuted. But Peter calls them, in that difficult context, to embrace submission. Why? Look at verse 19.

¹⁹For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

Some translations translate this sentence, "It is a commendable thing". That's possible but I don't think it's accurate. The Greek word is the word for gift or grace. This is a gracious thing. This is a gift from God – when, mindful of God, we endure sorrows while suffering unjustly.

How could enduring harsh treatment from governing authorities be a gift from God?
How? Why?

²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

To this we have been called! This isn't an accident, it's a calling! We are being invited to follow Jesus. The Jesus who suffered unjustly and yet He didn't protest. He didn't revile. He didn't disobey. He entrusted himself to Him who judges justly. Being 'mindful of God' He endured sorrows while suffering unjustly. And He is the pattern we are called to follow.

But, and this is critical, Christ didn't simply suffer as an example, he suffered as a substitute. We need to grasp this, or we will never be able to happily embrace submission. Why did Jesus give himself over to death? Why did He submit to such awful beating and scorn and the cursed death of the damned on the cross?

The answer of course is that He did it for you. He was there as your substitute.

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree..."

Jesus didn't suffer injustice simply to provide an example, He suffered injustice to rescue us from guilt of all the injustices and all the sin and all the rebellion we've committed. That's the Jesus who calls us to submit even when it's hard.

The only possible way we can find joy in submission is by understanding the glory of it. We get to do this, for Jesus' sake. We get to obey those God has placed over us, for Jesus sake. We get to follow him in the path of submission. We get to look like Him and act like Him and please God our Father like Him.

III. Current Application

Brothers and sisters, your Savior is calling you to the glory of submission. This isn't just a hard duty, it's better than that. There is a gospel power in submission. In our submission, we testify to the glory of Jesus who destroyed the Devil and won our salvation by submission.

God is giving us an opportunity to stretch spiritual muscles that, as independence loving Americans, are not as strong as they ought to be. We believe God has called us to follow Christ Jesus who submitted even unto death for our sake. And as we do, we will be

modeling something God cherishes a great deal – humble, beautiful, submission to those God has placed over us because we are mindful of God, and we love our Lord Jesus.

As your Session, we don't pretend we have this all figured out. You may see all sorts of problems and inconsistencies with our decisions. And you are free to speak to us about them! But let's do it together as we seek to submit to Christ. And let's remember that Jesus has purchased for us the freedom to submit even when we disagree, to submit – in the joyful confidence that our submission is deeply pleasing to God.

That doesn't mean you don't have options. You can appeal the actions of the Session to the Presbytery. That is not an act of insubordination. We will help you do that if you need guidance. If you don't like what the Presbytery says you can appeal to the General Assembly. But before you do, let me ask you this: have you taken seriously God's command to submit? Which will be a greater testimony to our world and to our kids about Jesus: that we took a stand against a mask policy? Or that we sought to patiently endure, being mindful of God, like Jesus, who submitted himself to death for us – and who lovingly cares for us?

Though great our sins and sore our woes,
His grace much more aboundeth;
His helping love no limit knows,
Our utmost need it soundeth.
Our Shepherd good and true is He,
Who will at last His Israel free.
From all their sin and sorrow.