

ROMANS

“Part 26: Government in Light of the Gospel”

Romans 13:1–7

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Scripture Reading

“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” (Rom 13:1–7).

Introduction

The gospel is a message that entails more than just personal, individual consequences. The redemption that the gospel describes is cosmic in nature.

The Christian gospel is the ultimate declaration of revolution against the world as we know it. It is the announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand. It is the proclamation of a world liberated from the powers of sin and death.

But if the gospel is revolutionary, does that mean we are to be revolutionaries?

Put in more concrete terms, in announcing the Lordship of Jesus Christ to the Romans, is Paul summoning the Christians of Rome to overthrow the power of Caesar and establish an empire for Christ? Should we now, as Christians in America, seek to take the reins of power and use that power to establish and enforce an explicitly Christian nation in the United States?

Though some would argue, yes. I argue, no. God’s agenda is for something far greater and far better than a kingdom of this world.

Christians are called to pray for and yearn for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We should work towards the kingdom of God coming in and through our lives.

However, the way the kingdom of God comes is not the way that the kingdoms of men have been advanced throughout history. God's kingdom comes not through the means of earthly power but gospel proclamation; not through the coercion of men, but the conviction of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, while it is not the task of Christians to bring forth the kingdom of God in fullness, it is our job to bear witness to Christ so that he might bring forth his own kingdom. It is our task to declare the gospel with our words and display the gospel with our lives in such a way that the welcomes the watching world into the life of Christ. In this way, we should eagerly long for spiritual revival and renewal that transforms more than individual lives but manifests in a more just and righteous society.

But the question remains: *how then should Christians understand and relate to the governments of this world?*

The verses we read today are perhaps the most significant verses of the New Testament regarding what we might call political theology. As Paul is continuing his discussion of how the Christian gospel shapes the Christian life, he will now explore the crucial matter of how we are to live faithfully as the people of God when we live within the kingdoms of men. Said more directly, this passage will show us how we should understand **"Government in Light of the Gospel."**

Exposition

1.) The Origin of Government

Last Monday, the Archbishop of Canterbury presided over the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II of England, as tens of millions of people across the globe viewed the proceedings. In fact, Reuters estimates that more than eleven million people tuned in to view the funeral proceedings in the United States alone.

As a part of the liturgy for her service, the Queen's crown, scepter, and orb were removed from her coffin and placed upon the church's altar [show **The Queen's Scepter, Crown, and Orb**]. This centuries-old act communicates a theology of power far outside the paradigm of many of us who live within the confines of a secular age. This act communicated that the Queen's authority to rule came not from man but from the Triune God, who created all things in heaven and earth.

Now, despite our occasional fascination with the British monarchy, Americans typically glory in that we are bound to no monarch. We declared our independence from the British crown, and we have built a culture that uniquely exalts individual liberty and freedom. Sometimes we value our freedom so much that we resist—or even *resent*—any form of institutional authority, power, or government.

Thus, we might be shocked to that the word of God actually commands the people of God to "be subject to" (ὑποτασσέσθω) and submissive toward our governing authorities as a way of submitting to God himself. As Paul writes, **"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” (Rom 13:1–2).

Now, I've been in vocational ministry just shy of twenty years, and I have noticed something that is fascinating about how Christians interact with this particular text. When a person or party is in power that we like, we tend to really like and want to talk about Romans 13. However, when a person or party is in power that we don't like, we tend to ignore, minimize, and find rather ingenious ways to work around applying Romans 13.

But our call to believe and obey Romans 13 is not contingent upon whether or not we like or dislike the person in charge at the time. The reason I know this is because Romans 13 was written at a time when an Emperor named Nero [show Nero]—who was one of the most wicked men in history—held the reins of power over Rome.

No, Paul is showing us all human authority—even Nero's—is derivative of God's ultimate authority. Authority is not a humanly contrived innovation but a divinely wrought institution with origins that reach back into the dawn of creation.

In fact, the Old Testament book of Genesis tells us that part of what it means to be made in the image of God is to possess “dominion” (רָדָה) over the earth (Gen 1:28). The first man and the first woman are then placed in a garden where they are called to cultivate the latent potential within creation. They are to use the capacity of language to name and understand the plants and animals. They are to promote order where chaos would grow if left unchecked.

At its best, the design of human authority in the Garden of Eden is a positive vision of human authority in a governmental setting as well. Authority is a God-given gift that God's image bearers are to use in order to cultivate goodness, clarity, and order within creation and human society. From Roman roads to highway interstates, from ancient aqueducts to the gorgeous state parks, from the earliest Latin laws to our nation's Bill of Rights—governmental authority can be, and often is, a gift of common grace.

So, while those who hold authority may be bad, Christians must see authority itself as a good and necessary aspect of life. Authority has its origin in God, not man, and this includes the authority held by the governments of this world.

2.) The Purpose of Government

Ever since humankind rebelled against the authority of God, the power of sin has introduced brokenness and pain into all of creation, including human societies and states. Instead of using authority to bear the image of our God and steward God's creation, humans now often use power to inflict violence, theft, deception, and oppression upon one another.

Thus, before sin entered the world, the role of human authority was to cultivate goodness and order. Now, after sin has entered the world, human authority exists in part to protect civilization from harm and destruction.

When a government is too weak or too corrupt to protect its own citizens, the result is chaos. Think of the American West in the late 1800s or the many failed states in our world today. In the absence of governing authority is terror, brutality, and oppression of the vulnerable.

Thus, God grants our governing authorities the necessary power—what the Apostle Paul calls the “sword” (μάχαιραν)—to bring judgment, vengeance, and punishment upon evil. Paul writes, *“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”* (Rom 13:3–4).

The Apostle Peter echoes an almost identical line of thought in his first epistle. He says, *“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good”* (1 Pet 2:13–14).

Taken together, the words of Scripture reveal that the purpose of government is to restrain evil, to encourage virtue, and to restore right where wrong has taken place. In a word, the purpose of government is to promote justice.

But we might ask, well, how can we contribute to a government that is more just? What should Christians do if we find our government promotes injustice instead of justice? These questions lead us to our next point.

3.) How Christians Should Relate with Government

It is undeniable that the primary call and command of Romans 13 to “be subject to” (ὑποτασσέσθω) “the governing authorities” (ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις), as a matter of both practical self-interest and Christian conscience. As Paul states in verse 5, *“Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience”* (Rom 13:5).

But what does it mean to submit to our governing authorities? Does this mean that we should be passive and pliant before everything our governing officials do? Not at all.

Firstly, the book of Acts shows us that Paul was more than willing to respectfully yet forcefully argue his case to government officials when he felt that he or others had been subjected to injustice (see: Acts 16:35–40). He had no qualms about appealing to his right to a fair trial as a citizen of Rome (see: Acts 25:11–12). In other words, one key way that Paul subjected himself to governing authorities was by going through and utilizing

proper legal channels to contend for justice instead of trying to enact vigilante justice on his own terms.

So, as Americans, we should contend for justice, we should steward the privileges of citizenship, vote our consciences, and be politically informed and engaged we feel led. But we should do so in the right way and through the right channels, as those who are submitted to our government.

Secondly, according to Romans 13, to subject ourselves or submit to our governing rulers means that we are to simply do good as faithful members of society. We are to abide by the laws of our land, contribute to the common good, and give proper honor and respect to those that God has placed in authority over us. Paul goes on to lay this out in clear terms, *“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”* (Rom 13:6–7).

Christians are to willingly pay taxes to help build cities and societies that benefit our neighbors and ourselves. Christians should be eager to come alongside governing authorities when they want to cultivate the common good through common grace measures like quality education, effective transportation, and reasonable defense.

Likewise, Christians are to honor and even pray for our governing leaders (cf. 1 Tim 2:1–4). I believe this includes not just our elected officials but also public servants like health officials and first responders (and, yes, even those who work for the IRS!). When we contribute to a just society, we commend the way of Jesus to our neighbors who are tempted to dislike and distrust Christians (cf. 1 Pet 2:15–17).

Now, it is true that ever since the creation was fractured by sin, human governments can be twisted and tainted in ways that work against the way God designed them to steward authority. So questions are immediately provoked by passages like this: What if our government becomes a source of oppression? What if obeying our government comes at the cost of disobeying God? What should Christians do if and when this happens?

Well, it did happen. Many of the Christians of Rome would suffer persecution and death at the hands of Nero, the same emperor who reigned when Paul wrote the words of Romans 13 [show Paul]. Instead of using being used to execute justice, the “sword” Caesar wielded was used to execute the Apostle Paul himself.

Later, there were moments when Rome would ask Christians to make a sacrifice within the Imperial Cult to prove that they were loyal to Rome. In other words, Rome wanted to force Christians to publicly confess Caesar—not Jesus—was Lord.

In such cases, Christians must resolve to obey God rather than man (cf. Acts 5:29). Many early Christians did make that resolution. But rather than taking up arms against the tyranny of the empire, the early Christians willingly subjected themselves to voluntary martyrdom.

One such martyr was an elderly man named Polycarp [show Polycarp]. He was a direct disciple of the Apostle John, who became a Christian as a young child and eventually became the leading pastor (or bishop) of the early Christian community in the Asia Minor town of Smyrna. He was arrested and brought before a magistrate. The early church historian Eusebius writes, *“But when the magistrate pressed him, and said, ‘Swear, and I will release thee; revile Christ,’ Polycarp said, ‘Fourscore and six years [eight-six years] have I been serving him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?’”*¹

And after saying these words, the elderly Polycarp willingly embraced death by fire rather than deny Christ. Even against gross injustice of human government, the early Christians chose the way of the cross rather than the way of the sword.

Nevertheless, insofar as our government does not compel us to disobey God, Christians are called to submit ourselves in good faith to our civil authorities. According to the New Testament, the preferred posture of Christians towards government is one of obedience, not resistance; toward faithful submission, not revolution. For in this posture, we are honoring the ultimate authority of God.

4.) How Christians Should See Ourselves in Relation to Government

Even though we have finished addressing the main points of Romans 13:1–7, I think it would be helpful to bring a few more key ideas from the full counsel of Scripture to this very important topic.

The main thrust of Romans 13 is a positive perspective on what human governments can be and are intended to be. But the Bible is a realistic book. So while the authority of the state in Romans 13 is presented as a servant of God and an instrument of justice. Passages like Revelation 13 can characterize human government as a monstrous beast that blasphemes God, makes war on the saints, conquers through force, and even competes for the worship of our hearts.

What does this mean? It means that Christians need to see ourselves in tension between Romans 13 and Revelation 13. We are to practice godly submission alongside appropriate suspicion toward the kingdoms of men. We are to honor the authority of our governing officials. Still, we must be mindful that the government's authority is not the ultimate authority.

We can seek to have a rightly ordered love for our nation in the form of a godly patriotism. But we are to be ever cautious of idolatrous nationalism that would seek to steal our hearts' ultimate allegiance, highest love, and worship from Christ.²

¹ Eusebius of Caesaria, “The Church History of Eusebius,” in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 190.

² For more regarding the spiritual dangers of nationalism, see: Ritchie, *Why Do the Nations Rage?*

We should seek to have a rightly calibrated expectations of politics, knowing that politics at their very best are but a flawed coping mechanism to contend for imperfect justice in a fallen world. We should recognize that human governments, at their very best, are flawed systems composed of flawed people attempting to serve communities that are inescapably flawed by sin.

But most of all, we are to remember that while we live in one nation here and now, our truest citizenship is in heaven, and our highest hope is in a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Christians are to see ourselves as, in the language of the Apostle Peter, “elect exiles” (1 Pet 1:1). And like the exiles of the Old Testament era, we are called to be faithful to the place God has sent us. We are to seek the welfare of our city and our nation. We are to plant gardens, build homes, raise families, and cultivate the good and the true (cf. Jer 29:4–7).

Yet, while we live in this world, we must not be conformed to this world (Rom 12:2). Like the faithful exiles of old, we must also remember our identity as the people of God. We must remember the promises of God. We must remember our true home. We must remember our true hope, convinced of the ultimate victory of God in Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere, *“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself”* (Phil 3:20–21).

Conclusion

The ultimate reason we can subject ourselves to governing authorities with full confidence is that there is no governing official or state capable of preventing the triumph of the kingdom of God. God is bending history toward redemption not just despite the empires of men but oftentimes through their unwitting aid. Nowhere is this more clear than in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, falsely accused of sedition and treason against Rome by his fellow Jews. He asks Jesus, “Are you a king?” Jesus tells him, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:33–38). And though he was perfectly righteous and innocent, and though, as God in human flesh, he could have called down myriads of warring angels to defend him, Jesus willingly submitted himself to the harsh and humiliating death on the cross at the hands of the governing authorities. And the blood he renders Rome will rend the veil.

By submitting to death on the cross, Jesus would atone for all our sins and make forgiveness possible. By submitting to death on the cross, Jesus would defeat the powers of sin and even the power of death itself. By submitting to death on the cross, Jesus would open the door to resurrection life. By submitting to death on a cross, Jesus would reclaim what was once a symbol of the empire of Rome and make it the symbol of the kingdom of God.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we have eyes to see the governments of this world in light of the gospel. As we seek to understand our place in the kingdoms of this world, may our ultimate hope be ever fixed upon the kingdom of God. As we seek to obey the commands of Scripture, may we remember and imitate the unlikely power of the cross.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Romans 13:1–7. What is the main command in this text? Do you struggle to *want* to obey the primary command of this passage, and if so, why?
2. How might this passage challenge Christians to be faithful citizens of our country?
3. How did Jesus relate to governing authorities in his lifetime? Why might his actions on this topic be relevant to this week's passage?