

Submitting to Authorities

Romans 13:1-7 on May 31, 2020



Please read Romans 13:1-7 before going further in this transcript.

Throughout history, mankind has experienced many significant periods of civil unrest. Times when we've felt the need to rise up against the governing authorities for various reasons. Even in the past week or two, the state of MN has experienced some significant examples of civil unrest: One example is the video of George Floyd's arrest & death in Minneapolis, which has now gone viral, and it has sparked massive protests, rioting, and looting. Multiple cars and buildings have been set on fire. Another example is the COVID-19 Pandemic has caused significant disagreement between the various governing agencies and religious leaders of all types, as to when we should reopen our places of worship. These current examples of civil unrest, make it immediately clear, just how relevant today's text from Romans 13, is for us today.¹ Romans 13 gives us direct, godly advice about how we should interact with our governing authorities. It may not be the truth that we WANT to hear right now, but it is most certainly the truth that we NEED to hear right now.

Please turn in your Bible to Romans 13:1. Today, we are wrapping up our sermon series on "Living for God." "Living for God" calls us to be subject to the governing authorities. Romans 13 gives us 3 reasons for this. 1st of all, **we should be subject to the governing authorities because...**

1 ...they are part of God's design. Romans 13:1 begins, "Let everyone 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." To be clear, God is our ultimate authority.² But God has used His ultimate authority, to establish the authority structures in our world. They are HIS design.³ The phrase, "Be subject to," is another way of saying "be submissive to." This "means to recognize one's place under someone else in a hierarchy that God himself established."⁴ Now each one of us, may be more, or less comfortable, with some of those authorities. For example, some of us are very comfortable with submitting ourselves to the authority of God's Word. But when it comes to the human authorities that God has established, we may be less likely to obey and honor them.

We may meet them with varying levels of acceptance and obedience. This includes everything from our view of authority within our homes, to our view of the authority within our workplace or with our teacher at school. It extends to how we view the authority of police officers, Game Wardens, and so on. Each of us faces daily decisions, as we encounter these various authorities in our lives. Each day we decide whether or not, we will honor and obey the authorities that God has established. Or, whether we will rebel.

"Living for God" calls us to be subject to the governing authorities that our wise and loving, Heavenly Father, has put over us. Now, perhaps you are thinking, "But Pastor Jerry, there is a BIG difference between obeying the Almighty God of the universe and obeying a HUMAN police officer. There is a BIG difference between disobeying something written in God's Holy Word and going fishing without a license." Are you sure about that? I'm going to ask us to rethink that viewpoint, because it may not be as BIG of a difference as you think. Romans 13 seems to be stating it pretty clearly, that our earthly governing authorities have been established BY God. In fact, Romans 13:2 goes on, "Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." The *ESV* makes it even clearer: "...whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed...."

This verse begs the question: Are we "living for God" OR, are we resisting, are we living in rebellion against the very things that God has instituted? The governing authorities have been put in place by God's design because our God is a God of order. In His wisdom and because He loves us, God has set up our world to work in an orderly way. 1 Corinthians 14 talks about this, "...God is not a God of disorder but of peace..."⁵ The end of Romans 13:2 warns that those of us who rebel, "will bring judgment on themselves." Some Bible scholars say that this "judgment" refers to God's personal divine judgment on

¹ In fact, anyone who might claim that the Bible is out of touch with the real issues in our world today, may want to rethink that claim.

² "crowning all hierarchies is God, so our submitting to secular rulers must always take place in light of our allegiance to our ultimate authority: God." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2316 footnote on Romans 13:1.

³ He had every right to do this since He's the Creator and Sustainer of all things. He chose to place various authorities in and around us, to govern our lives in this world.

⁴ See Colossians 3:15-4:1 and Titus 3:1. *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2316 footnote on Romans 13:1.

⁵ This verse goes on to say, "...as in **all the congregations** of the Lord's people."

people who disobey the earthly authorities. Other Bible scholars say that this “judgment” refers to the judgment doled out BY the governing authorities.⁶ Frankly, both have merit. In other words, in one sense, God Himself will hold us accountable for how we obey/disobey the laws of our land. In another sense, a portion of God’s judgment has been delegated out, to the various secular governing authorities.⁷

Now, we do find some particular exceptions where early Christians did disobey the governing authorities.⁸ The book of Acts comes to mind. This isn’t about the Roman authorities, but rather the ruling Jewish spiritual authorities, known as the Sanhedrin.⁹ Disobedience to these authorities shows up in Acts 5:28-29, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name (referring to Jesus),” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching... Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” So these Christ-followers were teaching about Jesus even though the authorities had told them not to. Therefore, clearly there are times when believers need “to obey God rather than human authorities.”¹⁰

Let’s cut to the chase: some Christ-followers are growing concerned that our own government has recently overreached their authority, by requiring church buildings to close. However, the fact is, most places of worship closed their buildings of their own free will, for the sake of public safety, and for solidarity with the needs of the surrounding community. In fact, that’s why we closed our building, for safety reasons, not because the government said that we had to. That being said, we do also want to honor and respect the governing authorities that God has established. So it is good and appropriate for places of worship to obey our governing authorities, rather than rebel against them. That is, so long as they are NOT asking us to disobey God. So maybe it’s important to note, that at no time during our building closure has any governing authority suggested that we change our message or our mission to proclaim the gospel. We were simply urged, along with everyone else in our community, to take safety precautions for the common good. In other words, even though our governing authorities have urged church buildings to remain closed for the past 2 months, they never once ordered us to stop talking about Jesus. If they ever do tell us not to talk about Jesus, you can be certain, that our church will be among the very first to “obey God rather than human beings!”¹¹ We should (also) be subject to the governing authorities because...

2 ...they govern for our good. (to reinforce right and wrong) Romans 13:3-4 says, “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. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good....” God’s design is for these governing authorities to be “for your good.” Rulers exist for the benefit of society - to protect the general public by maintaining good order.”¹² To be fair, “Paul describes secular rulers as they SHOULD function, not as they always DO function. He knows from firsthand experience, and from the long history of his own [Jewish] people, that rulers do not always reward good and punish evil.”¹³ But they’re supposed to!

The only reason that secular authorities even have the capability of leading well, is that God has given them certain “Common-grace attributes.”¹⁴ What we mean by “common-grace attributes” is that every person, Christian or not, has the capacity to exhibit certain attributes, that God has made available to all of mankind, not just believers. Jesus teaches us in Matthew 5:45 that our “...Father in heaven... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”¹⁵ In a similar way, everyone who has been created by God is blessed with “common-grace attributes.” Despite our sinful condition, and even before that sinful condition is redeemed through faith in Jesus, we have these attributes. They include many different unmerited gifts from God. In fact, that’s why we call them “common-GRACE attributes,” because they are unmerited. This is NOT about God’s SAVING GRACE but

⁶ Interestingly, even the two most recent *NIV Study Bibles*, lean in different directions on this. One says, “more likely, punishment by the governing authorities,” and the other says, “perhaps more likely, God’s judgment.” See the footnotes on Romans 13:2 in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1912 and *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2316.

⁷ This would NOT refer to eternal damnation. Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, p. 109.

⁸ But frankly, we can all probably find way more examples in the Bible, and throughout history, when God’s people obeyed the governing authorities, even if it made them miserable at times.

⁹ Acts 4:18-20 says, “Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

¹⁰ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1912 footnote on Romans 13:3.

¹¹ Read all of Daniel 6 and especially note verses 5,7, 10, 13, 16, and 20-28.

¹² *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1912 footnote on Romans 13:4.

¹³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2316 footnote on Romans 13:3.

¹⁴ To learn more, see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/goodness-god-common-grace/>

¹⁵ See also Acts 14:16-17.

rather about His UNIVERSAL GOODNESS in blessing mankind with various aptitudes, for doing good in this world. We're talking here about all of the many abilities, that positively contribute toward human civilization. Things like promoting justice and the rule of law in our society. Things like fighting against human trafficking. Making various social and economic improvements. Medical advancements, astonishing works of art and music, and so on.

One of these common-grace attributes is the ability to govern. And we should not take this lightly. What this means is that governing authorities (at least those who serve well) serve to hold back many of the potential negative impacts of mankind's moral depravity.¹⁶ Proverbs 8:15 says it this way, "By me kings reign and rulers issue decrees that are just." This is what Romans 13:3-4 are driving at. Sometimes God uses the secular governing authorities to render His judgment and discipline. Other times He uses them to offer His protection and provision.¹⁷ The common-grace attribute of good governance, allows them to "issue decrees that are just." This serves to hold back the evil which otherwise might thrive, unchecked. In other words, without the rule of law, our society would collapse. Many of those who uphold the rule of law are not even Christians, but they are serving God as they uphold what is right in this world. They also push back against what is wrong. These are clear benefits of God's common-grace, for the good of all of mankind.¹⁸

Romans 13:4-5 go on, "...rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience." In one sense, the sword here is a metaphor for Roman power and governance. But, in another sense, it is literal. They used real swords to enforce the law. To reinforce everyone's understanding of right and wrong. Those whom they deemed to be wrongdoers, were often put to the sword. Quite literally. In other words, sometimes force is required to maintain order in this world.¹⁹ We should note, that in verse 5, Paul makes it clear, that for believers, being subject to the governing authorities is also a matter of conscience, NOT just a matter of getting caught or getting punished. A 3rd reason we should be subject to the governing authorities is because...

3 ...they are God's servants. Romans 13:6-7 says, "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 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."^{20 21} In other words, a proper Christian attitude calls us to show our support for the governing authorities in at least 2 ways: 1) by paying our taxes.²² 2) by paying respect. But what should we do when these servants don't behave in ways that are worthy of respect and honor? For example, how does all of this apply to the current situation in Minneapolis with George Floyd? God's Word calls us to be subject to the governing authorities, because they are God's servants. BUT, what should we do, IF one of those governing authorities, turns out to be the one who is doing wrong? I say "IF," because I don't know all of the details of Mr. Floyd's arrest and death.

But broadly speaking, I can say this, even the governing authorities THEMSELVES, fall under God's design for order in this world. Therefore, IF ANY governing authority abuses that authority and operates outside of that design, he or she must be held accountable. When they are no longer reinforcing right and wrong, but rather are doing the wrong, then THEY must answer to the governing authority over THEM.²³ But even in situations where we need to call our governing authorities to account, we need to make sure that our efforts aim at IMPROVING, rather than DISMANTLING, the rule of law that God has designed. It's unhelpful to simply lash out against all of the governing authorities, by demanding our rights, and sabotaging the ability of the GOOD people within our government to lead. God's Word teaches us that we should not return evil for evil. So rioting, looting, and burning down the city are not a proper response, nor

¹⁶ See discussion by Sam Storm in his article, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/goodness-god-common-grace/>

¹⁷ "the purpose of government is twofold: to promote and protect the good of society, and to deter crime, restraining and punishing criminals" Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, pp. 108-109.

¹⁸ One could even go so far as to say, that God's grace and kindness to Christians, is in some measure passed along, through the protection and benefits of our government. Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, pp. 109-110.

¹⁹ Ponder Matthew 11:12. In Romans 13:4 "we find the Biblical principle of using force for the maintenance of good order." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1912 footnote on Romans 13:4.

²⁰ The term "servant" does not always mean "worshipper," but sometimes, as in Romans 13, it means "vassal" or "agent of judgment." See Isaiah 45:1; Jeremiah 25:9, 27:6; and Daniel 4:17. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1269 footnote on Jeremiah 25:9.

²¹ In Matthew 22:21 Jesus said to, "...give back to Caesar what is Caesar's...."

²² In verse 6, it is "possible that Paul has an eye on the Romans Christians since secular historians mention a 'tax revolt' in Rome at about the time Paul writes Romans." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2316 footnote on Romans 13:6.

²³ See 1 Timothy 5:20.

a helpful response, and certainly not a Christian response. Anarchy has no place in God's design for a well-ordered, well-governed world.²⁴

One writer notes the following, about calling our governing authorities to account: In Romans 13, Paul doesn't give any indication that we get to pick and choose which governing authorities we are to be subject to and which ones we can ignore. Paul's advice is comprehensive in scope: be subject to the governing authorities. Regardless of the time in history in which you are living, regardless of WHO your leaders are or WHERE you happen to live. HOWEVER, this writer also goes on to note that "The state is not absolute in its demands over us, nor is it infallible or always on the side of justice."²⁵ In other words, if a particular governing authority suppresses good and promotes evil, then they've abandoned their divine role and they should lose their God-given authority to govern.²⁶ They should be removed from their position and punished.

Over all of this, is the comforting reality that God is the ultimate "Ruler of All." We might say that He is the ultimate sword bearer. Therefore, no one in this world is untouchable AND no one can ultimately get away with any kind of evil. God's servants are accountable to God. Last week, we talked about Romans 12:19, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." Romans 14:12 also reminds us, "So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God."²⁷

Obviously, one sermon is not able to completely address every question we may be asking today. There are many more applications that need to be talked through and teased out, regarding the current circumstances in our world. This is all the more reason to go through the discussion questions that have been provided in the bulletin today. If this topic and this text has piqued your interest, one of the best things that you can do, is to follow up by discussing those questions with someone else this week.

For now, let's close by reflecting on the words to the hymn, "Be Thou My Vision."²⁸ "Be Thou My Vision" is a traditional Irish folk tune from the 8th century. It was translated into English in 1905 and put to verse in 1912. The musical arrangement familiar to most of us was done in 1973.²⁹ ³⁰ Please note the flow of this song. It begins with a prayer asking God to be our vision, as the Lord of our hearts, to be our light. It then moves to a request for wisdom. It then declares that God is "first in my heart" as the "High King of Heaven." It closes with this theme of the "High King of Heaven" and declares victory "whatever befall."

Whatever may come, may God be our Vision as the "Ruler of all!"
Here are the 3 verses found in our church's hymnal (#532):

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art

High King of Heaven, my victory won May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heaven's Sun
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all

And now, Brother or Sister in Christ, even as we submit to the authority of our Heavenly Father, let us also submit to the governing authorities that He has so wisely and lovingly established for us.

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²⁴ Agitation and subversion are rarely, if ever, called for. However, the story of Schindler's List comes to mind.

²⁵ Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, p. 113.

²⁶ See Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, p. 114.

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:10 reminds us, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

²⁸ It's an old Irish folk tune. The original words are from a very early 8th century Irish text called St. Patrick's Breastplate, 16 verses long. (Here's an interesting website you can search by name of the hymn tune: <https://hymndescants.org/slanc>) The hymn 'Be thou my vision' is from a very early 8th century Irish text, Rop tú mo Baile, consisting of sixteen verses of 'Be thou...', a reiterative prayer for protection known as a Lorica (cf. ST PATRICK'S BREASTPLATE, 'I bind...'). The hymn remained in the Irish monastic tradition for centuries before it became associated with the folk tune we now call SLANE. The literal 1905 English translation by Mary E. Byrne, M.A., appeared in Ériu (the journal of the School of Irish Learning), and the most commonly used metrical version was introduced in 1912 by Eleanor H. Hull.

²⁹ Mary E. Byrne, Eleanor H. Hull, and Donald P. Hustad. *The Worshipping Church: A Hymnal*, Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL, 1990.

³⁰ The Christian band, Rend Collective, recently did a remake of this hymn in 2012 and titled it "You Are My Vision." Check out the lyrics at <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/rendcollective/youaremyvision.html>