

Thank God for Government!

Romans 13:1-7

February, 11, 2024

Luke's Gospel records a well-known story from the teaching of Jesus. We know it as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus's story about a compassionate Samaritan serves as an illustration of loving our neighbor.

But it's easy to forget that this parable was originally delivered in response to a particular question.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29, NIV).

The questioner wanted Jesus to clarify just how far love for neighbor actually extended. In order to justify himself, this man wanted to hear that love had its limits.

Perhaps there's a bit of this self-justifying "Who is my neighbor?" spirit in us when we come to a text like Romans 13:1-7. When the Apostle Paul begins by saying, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities," our gut reaction is to ask, "All of them?"

New Testament scholar Douglas Moo notes that "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Rom. 13:1-7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning."¹

Similarly, in her recently published book, *The Ballot and the Bible*, author Kaitlyn Schiess argues that "We tend to invoke passages like Romans 13 selectively, depending on the issue or politician."²

Like the man who asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" we may ask Paul, "Which governing authorities?"

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 1996, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 806.

² Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Got from Here*, 2023, Brazos Press, 22.

Turn with me, if you haven't already to Romans 13. I want us to follow the flow of the argument. If Paul were a musician, we might say this passage was composed in three movements: an ethical exhortation, a theological explanation, and an everyday application.

Let's start with the ethical exhortation, the thrust of this passage: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (v. 1a). Because our understanding of the passage hinges on this part of the verse, it's worth taking time to unpack its meaning.

As he did in chapter 12, Paul begins this chapter with a command: "be subject to the governing authorities." He addresses his command to "everyone" (v. 1a). Interpreters debate whether "everyone" in Paul's mind meant all people or just all Christians. Personally, I think the command is true for all people, but in a letter written to the church in Rome, this maxim was certainly to be obeyed by all Christians.

The verb in this sentence, translated as "be subject to" shows up dozens of times in the New Testament. The call for Christians to submit is a call for us to acknowledge and honor the divinely-instituted positions of authority God has ordained.

God has instituted order and authority in the family, the marriage relationship, the workplace, the church, and in the case of Romans 13 the state. Even the Lord Jesus—according to Luke's Gospel—when he was a boy "was submissive" to his parents, Joseph and Mary" (Luke 2:51, ESV).

So the main command in this passage is for "everyone [to] be subject to the governing authorities" (v. 1a). Paul uses another word in verse 3 to further define who these authorities are; he calls them "rulers" (v. 3). Paul's original readers would have understood this as referring to human rulers in positions of governing authority.

I'm the oldest of five siblings: three boys; two girls. The second oldest is my sister, Gretchen. As firstborns tend to do, I can remember that whenever I tried to pull rank as the older brother and order my little sister to do something, Gretchen would remind me, "You're not the boss of me!"

Another way to say this is "Who made you king? Who put you in charge?" It's a fair question and one Paul intended to answer. The ethical exhortation to be subject to the governing authorities had to be rooted in theological truth or else Paul's readers would have every right to ask, "Who made them king? They're not the boss of me!"

Look closer at the explanation in verse 1 and following. Notice that Paul grounds his command by saying "there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (v. 1).

Those statements are two ways of saying the same thing, stated positively and negatively. No ruler holds a position of governing authority “except that which God established,” and every governing authority that now exists, exists because God has put them in that position. We could restate things this way:

Every ruler holds his or her governing authority by the sovereign will of God.

From our perspective, people tend to assume authority and power in one of three ways. Some rulers are elected to their position. Others, like William, Prince of Wales will inherit the throne upon the death or abdication of his father. In other instances, power is sometimes taken violently through acts of insurrection or military coup.

Scripture, however, tells us that over and above these human means, God’s sovereign will guides the rise and fall of every earthly power. Again, **every ruler holds his or her governing authority by the sovereign will of God.**

In Genesis, we read about a man named Joseph, a great-grandson of Abraham whom God sovereignly guided to one of the highest places of power in Egypt. And yet, when the story continues in Exodus, Scripture tells about the rise of “a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, [who] came to power in Egypt” (Exo. 1:8, NIV).

The Old Testament also tells of a man named Daniel who had first-hand experience with the hand of God guiding the earthly authority of a king. Even though King Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for Daniel’s deportation to Babylon, Daniel could say of God, “He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning” (Dan. 2:21, NIV).

In Romans 13:1 we have an ethical exhortation followed by a theological explanation. Why should everyone be subject to the governing authorities? Because **every ruler holds his or her governing authority by the sovereign will of God.**

Paul expands on his theological explanation in verse 2 and following. He says in verse 2, “Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (v. 2).

The conclusion Paul reaches in verse 2 is that **opposition to governing authority is opposition to the authority of God.** An unwillingness to submit to divinely-instituted rulers is an unwillingness to submit to God’s own rule.

The root of this rebellious spirit goes back to Adam and Eve’s act of opposition to God’s authority in the Garden of Eden. When Eve took for herself and for her husband that which God said was off limits, they were effectively saying to God, “Who are you to tell us what is good and what is evil? Who says we can’t determine for ourselves what is good? Who made you king?”

That rebellious attitude has passed to every generation since and resides within our sinful hearts today. I appreciate the way author and theologian D. A. Carson describes our sinful rebellion. He calls it “the de-god-ing of God.”³ Carson says,

“If God makes image-bearers and pronounces what is good and what is evil, if he orders the whole system, then to come along at any point and say, “No, I will declare my own good. What you declare to be evil, I will declare to be good. What you say is good, I will declare to be evil.”—this is why the tree bearing this fruit is said to be the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What is crucial is not the tree but the rebellion. What is so wretchedly tragic is God’s image-bearer standing over against God. This is the de-god-ing of God so that I can be my own god. This, in short, is idolatry.”⁴

Again, Paul says in verse 2, “Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (v. 2). **Opposition to governing authority is opposition to the authority of God.**

When we get to verses 3 and 4, Paul uses an interesting term to describe those whom God sovereignly places in positions of authority. Look with me at verses 3-4:

“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. 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” (vv. 3-4).

Paul calls these people “God’s servants” (v. 4).

We’re used to referring to government officials as public servants, so to describe them as God’s servants might not sound strange. But those of you reading from the King James Version see a different word here. Servants can also be translated as *ministers*.

The word “servant” that Paul chose is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe those who do the work of Christian ministry. It’s also used of the role of deacon in a local church context.

By no means is Paul suggesting that every ruler is doing the work of ministry in the same way that pastors, elders, deacons, or Sunday School teachers do ministry. And

³ D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story*, 2010, Baker Books, 33.

⁴ Ibid.

yet, the *ministry* or *service* God has assigned to these rulers—including secular governing authorities—is the service of maintaining good social order in the world.

Their God-given role is to “commend” (NIV) or “approve” (ESV) what is good, and to judge and punish wrongdoing. Therefore, Paul goes on to say, “do what is right and you will be commended. ...But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason” (vv. 3-4).

Scripture says the divinely-instituted ministry of the state is, as Pastor John Stott puts it, “to promote and reward the good, and to restrain and punish evil.”⁵ **God has ordained for the state to promote human flourishing and administer his justice.**

Therefore, Paul reiterates in verse 5, “it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience” (v. 5). Notice that Paul gives two reasons here why it’s not only wise to submit to the governing authorities, but it’s also the right thing to do.

First, since God has ordained and authorized the state promote human flourishing and administer his justice, it’s best not to be on the pointy end of the sword. But second, a more fundamental reason why submission to the state is necessary is that it’s “a matter of conscience” (v. 5). What Paul says here goes back to verse 2. All people—and in particular, God’s people—must not reject the divinely-instituted social order that he has put into place for our good.

There are numerous ways Christians can apply this command to everyday life. Paul chose the payment of taxes as one practical application of such submission. Whether we apply this passage to paying our taxes this spring, or as Paul expands in verse 7, by giving proper respect and honor to whom it is due, the principle remains the same: **submission to the governing authorities God has ordained is ultimately an act of submission to the authority of God.**

Now, before we wrap this passage up, let me address the obvious concern many have with this passage. How are God’s people to obey his word and submit to the governing authorities in cases where the governing authorities promote what is evil? Are there situations where Romans 13:1-7 no longer applies? When does submission equal sin? The answer requires us to pursue wisdom, discernment, and much humility.

Without a doubt, there is a pattern in Scripture where obedience to the will of God requires believers to act in disobedience to the sinful demands of an earthly ruler. You may recall the story from the book of Daniel of the three godly men who refused to obey their king’s edict to engage in idolatrous worship.

⁵ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, 1994, InterVarsity Pres, 344.

The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar asked these men,

“Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ...if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Dan. 3:14-18, NIV).

The book of Acts similarly speaks about a time when the followers of Jesus were confronted for preaching the gospel.

“The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:27-29, NIV).

By no means is Paul’s instruction in Romans 13:1-7 to submit to the governing authorities a requirement for Christians to abandoned godly discernment and adopt a posture of unqualified obedience to the state. In the hierarchy of authority, God’s ways always reign supreme.

But with this qualification in mind, let us beware of a potentially dangerous underlying attitude. As was the case with the man who sought to justify himself by asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” let’s be careful not to come to Romans 13:1-7 seeking to justify ourselves by asking “Which governing authorities?”

As shocking as it might have been to hear that the compassionate individual in Jesus’s famous parable was a Samaritan, do we find it equally unbelievable that God might raise up a leader for his purposes from an opposing political party?

Are we willing to follow Romans 13 and be subject to the governing authorities only as long as our team wins?

Should the “wrong” candidates get elected this November, must I live in fear of what they might do to the cause of Christ, or is God calling me to live by faith and trust that “there is no authority except that which God has established” (v. 1)?

Our sovereign God can and does use sinful rulers to serve his eternal purposes.

Let me close by looking at two prayers from Scripture, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

The prophet, Habakkuk lived during a time of national moral corruption and the threat of international violence. Things did not look good for God’s people. And so the prophet turned to God in a prayer of lament.

“How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Hab 1:2-4, NIV).

Now hear God’s answer:

“Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor” (Hab. 1:5-7, NIV).

Many years later, not long after the first Pentecost, the newly-formed church was under pressure from the local authorities. The same rulers who were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus now turned their attention to silencing Jesus’s disciples. And so in Acts 4 we read about how the church responded to those threats.

“Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “ ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:24-30, NIV).

No matter who holds a position of power, **our sovereign God can and does use sinful rulers to serve his eternal purposes.**

Let’s pray.