

Submission to Authorities

Romans 13:1-7

Series: Romans, Spring 2023: Walking Out the Truth

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Text: Romans 13:1-7

Worship: Sovereign God

Key Sentence:

Those who appropriately submit are not well known, but are quietly effective.

Outline:

I. Submit to God's appointed authorities (Romans 13:1-2)

II. Authority is intended to promote good conduct (Romans 13:3-5)

III. This is part of a larger principle: civic duty (Romans 13:6-7)

Romans 13:1–7 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.

³For 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, ⁴for 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. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay 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.

Submission to Authorities Romans 13:1-7

I want to begin with a little mental exercise. It should be simple. Think of a person who you, or other people, consider a hero because he submitted to the laws and decrees of his national government. It should be simple, but isn't it easier to think of heroes who defied their government to do what was right?

To begin with, we remember the Hebrew midwives, who defied Pharaoh's order to kill the boy babies of the Hebrew women. During the time of the exile we remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who chose the fiery furnace over worship of the king's golden image. Later Daniel refused to stop praying to Yahweh, per the king's reluctant decree, and he was thrown into the lion's den. In the New Testament the disciples were persecuted by both the Jewish leaders and the Romans, but they refused to stop teaching about Jesus. In Acts 5 Peter and John were brought before the Jewish council "and the high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'" That principle, we must obey God rather than men, has been foundational to evaluating this tension ever since.

Early Christians were often martyred because they proclaimed "Jesus is Lord," and refused to say "Caesar is Lord." In the fifth century Telemachus, a Christian monk gave his life to protest the cruelties of Roman gladiatorial combat, and the gladiators never fought to the death again. Jumping forward there were Christians who refused to adhere to Nazi decrees. The number was smaller than it should have been, but real. Think of Corrie and Betsie ten Boom who defied the Germans by hiding Jews in their home. Betsie died in the prison camp, and Corrie devoted her life to telling the story. There were others. In the 2019 film *A Hidden Life*, we saw the story of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian, a devout Catholic, who refused to swear an oath to Hitler and fight for the Nazis. On the allied side there was Desmond Doss, a conscientious objector who refused to carry a rifle but became a medic and rescued 75 wounded soldiers in one night at Hacksaw Ridge on the island of Okinawa.

In our generation more Christians have died for their faith than in any previous time. Many of these have been North Korean or Chinese. Just this week World News Group had a story about Christians who escaped from North Korea. They were aided by a Chinese Pastor named Han Chung Reel.

One of the escapees says “Whenever those Koreans managed to leave their country and met people like pastor Han who can help them but also who can teach them the word of God it became a big threat to the State Security Bureau so in April 2016 the Bureau sent their people into China and assassinated Pastor Han.” Open Door Ministries International documents Christian martyrdom year by year and conservatively lists 5621 Christians who died for their faith last year. Most were practicing their faith in defiance of some government or local entity. In Nigeria, for example, armed groups like Boko Haram and others have conducted devastating raids on Christian communities.

Okay. Back to the thought exercise. Have you thought of many people deemed Christian heroes because they submitted to government authorities? I imagine a few of you have. Certainly many soldiers have been both Christians and heroic in their sacrifice for their country. But nobody is a hero for voting. Nobody is a hero for paying taxes, though it sometimes feels heroic. While you keep thinking, let’s consider today’s passage, which calls for submission to the government. What I want to say today is that those who appropriately submit are not well known, but are quietly effective. I think I can show this from both Scripture and history. In Romans 13:1-7 verses 1 and 2 tell us to submit to God’s appointed authorities. Verses 3 to 5 teach us that such authority is intended to promote good conduct. And verses 6 and 7 tell us that this submission is part of a larger principle, civic duty.

Let’s read the whole passage. Romans 13:1–7 *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. ³For 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, ⁴for 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. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay 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.*

I need to comment on the commentaries. Most of those I regularly use devote most of their thoughts on our verses to justifying the kinds of heroism we’ve just talked about, as if the purpose of these verses was to make you think of all the counterexamples, to teach you when disobedience to the state is acceptable.

I call that the “yeah-but.” Before we “yeah-but” these verses we should examine them and decide how to “yeah” them. I’m not saying that the kinds of disobedience we applauded earlier are not right. But they are not the norm and Paul didn’t see them as the norm when he wrote Romans 13.

That said, Romans 13:1 “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” This applies to everyone. It includes you. It includes me. No one gets out of obedience to this command, which is to be subject to, or to submit. This is a common New Testament word which means to put under authority or to place oneself under authority. We can see this in the military. The private is under the authority of the sergeant, who is under authority of the lieutenant, who is under the captain and so forth. The New Testament applies this to Jesus submitting to his father, and in fact to Jesus submitting to his earthly parents, just like all children. Church members are to submit to church leaders. Most famously, notoriously, wives are to submit to their husbands. In most cases this submission is because the authority is ordained by God, set up by God, though slaves were to submit to their masters. Slavery was not a divine ordination, but a reality Christians were stuck with in the first century. Yet even in a non-godly institution, submission was still the response of a believer.

So the principle of submission to authority is integral to Scripture. The Bible knows nothing of a person who is entirely independent, self-sufficient and self-governing, because the most foundational submission is submission to God. James 4:7 “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” Before you and I can have peace with any of these other submission commands we have to embrace the fact that God has the right to tell us what to do. Despite what the film *Invictus* taught us and what Nelson Mandela modeled, the highest ideal is not “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” The highest ideal is “deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me.”

We are to be in submission to “the governing authorities.” This would include in Paul’s day submission to Caesar. In our day submission to the government of the United States. But it’s not limited to that. It’s national, state, and local. It’s the police and the courts and the town council. It’s a comprehensive term.

But why? Verse 1 again: “For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Authority is from God. The institutions of the state are established by God. This is clear throughout the Bible. In Exodus 9 God says to Pharaoh the supreme ruler of Egypt “for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” When Israel went into exile God said that he had established Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon as God’s servant.

Later, when Nebuchadnezzar got too puffed up about it he made the king like a dumb animal of the field. “until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” Daniel himself teaches that God “changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.” This doesn’t mean all human authority always does God’s revealed will. It means that human government was created by God for good purposes and even when those good purposes are abused, the authority of God should be respected. “Therefore,” verse 2, “whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” Because God created authority and decried submission to it, it is not good for people to refuse to submit. The corollary is that it is good for people to submit, to do what the authority says. This is the principle, submit to government authority because to resist it is to resist what God has made. Government has the right to tell you what to do.

Now if you’re a normal person you are right now thinking the “yeah, but” thought. “Yeah, but what if the government does this, or does that or does this other thing.” It’s a legitimate thought. Many heroes, both biblical and down through history have “yeah-butted” their governments, and we admire them for it. But it’s wrong for us to get to the “yeah-but” before we get to the “yeah.” For the moment let’s just agree that there is a “yeah-but” and continue thinking.

Verses 3-5 remind us that authority as established by God is intended to promote good conduct. Verse 3 “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” This is basic. Rulers and the rule of law are intended to bring punishment on bad conduct and bring fear on those who perpetrate it. In a good government if you don’t do bad things, you don’t get punished. I’m pretty sure no one in this room committed murder this morning. But if you did you are probably sitting here in a cold sweat, terrorized that you are going to be caught. The law against murder is a terror to bad conduct. But if you didn’t commit a murder or other crime this morning, you probably haven’t thought much about the police coming in and dragging you out. Government authority is not a terror to good behavior. “Yeah-but what about a country like North Korea where gathering for church is a capital offense.” We’re not doing “yeah-but” yet. We’re looking at God’s design, not every possible abuse of God’s design.

Verse 3, again “Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God’s servant for your good.” In God’s design, government authority approves of those who do good. In the United States the highest award given to a civilian is called the Presidential Medal of Freedom and is given for “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.”

All kinds of people have received this award since it was established in 1963, ranging from government officials to entertainers to social reformers to scientists to athletes: Fred Rogers, “Mr. Rogers,” Simone Biles the gymnast, Mother Theresa. Admiral Grace Hopper, computer pioneer. James Webb of NASA. And so on. The common denominator is that the President at the time agreed this person had done good. Government has that right.

“But,” verse 4, “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.” The sword in this verse represents punishment or justice up to and including the death penalty. God’s design for the fallen world is that we live in nations where doing harm gets you in trouble. If you do murder, if you do rape, if you do steal, if you do oppress, the government carries out God’s wrath on that wrongdoing. Paul frames this in terms of the king or the ultimate authority, but this is carried out by his representatives all the way down to your local police officer. This is why you are instinctively afraid, or at least filled with adrenaline when the flashing lights appear in your rearview mirror.

“Therefore,” verse 5, “one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.” Paul is talking to believers here, and he says we don’t just obey your government for the negative reason of not getting in trouble, but obey for the positive reason of serving God. Paul uses this word conscience frequently and it almost always means “conscience toward God,” the inward sense of what God requires. I do what’s good not because the government says so but because God says so. We see this also in 1st Peter “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.” That’s pretty clear. The kind of submission to authority we are being called to is the kind that compels us to do good.

Verse 6 “For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.” Pay your taxes. Fallen human nature wants to find an excuse not to. But government is ordained by God and has a right to revenue to carry out its purposes. “Yeah-but, what if my money is being used for evil purposes?” We’re not doing “yeah-buts” yet. Paul and Peter both recognize that the government is supposed to be doing good and that taxes support that. Therefore, verse 7, “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.”

Before we go further we have to notice that Jesus said much the same thing in the Gospels. Mark's version tells us the Pharisees came to test Jesus. They flattered him for a few moments, then said "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Jesus has them bring a Roman coin and says "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said "Caesar's." ¹⁷Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Paul's summary, "Pay to all what is owed them" is likely based on Jesus' teaching.

Jesus makes clear a distinction, implied by Paul, that while Caesar may be owed your taxes, only God is owed your ultimate allegiance. Yet in the horizontal realm we are to pay our taxes, public debts, and offer respect and honor. In other words, we are to do our civic duty. In a system like ours where citizens have responsibilities, this means to vote. It means to try to be knowledgeable about local, state and national issues, from social issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ activism to financial issues like debt and inflation, to issues of religious freedom or human rights. This may not have been within the scope of civic duty in Rome, but it is within ours in a constitutional republic.

So we've seen that we are to submit to our government authorities as deriving their authority from God. This authority is intended to promote good conduct and punish evil. Finally, it's time to address the "yeah" and "yeah-but." Because I want to send you home with the positive vision, we'll handle the "yeah-but" first. Simple answer: there are "yeah-buts." There are times when submission is not the right thing to do. We've already mentioned Peter and John before the Sanhedrin. "We must obey God rather than men." That's the principle we apply to all cases of submission, whether to government or church leaders or employers or husbands or even parents. We obey God first and always.

R. Kent Hughes expands on this in his Romans commentary and I'll share just a few of his thoughts. He says "There are at least three areas in which a Christian should resist authority. First, if he is asked to violate a command of God." He gives the example of Peter and John and then says "The command of God always takes precedence over the command of government. There are no exceptions." "Secondly, Christians must resist when asked to do an immoral act. . . . Christians must never think it is okay to commit immoral or unethical acts simply because an authority has requested it." Thirdly, believers must never go against their Christian conscience. This could involve participation in inappropriate entertainment, working in institutions that perform abortions or providing cakes to LGBTQ+ couples. Believers must not sin against their conscience. Hughes says "There are, of course, areas where good Christians do not agree in matters of conscience. In these areas we need to let people who are serious about Scripture and in submission to God make their own choices."

So, “yeah-but.” You don’t have to go along with the Nazis or the Communists in Russia, China or North Korea. You don’t have to go along with the social pressure right here in the United States that opposes God’s revealed design for sexuality or the preciousness of human life. Civil disobedience is a Christian response, though you have to be willing to accept the consequences.

But the “yeah” of all this is a commitment to submission and respect. Jesus told us we’re to be the salt of the earth, distributed into the culture to keep it from decay. We can’t entirely be rebels and renegades against our own culture, or even withdraw entirely from our culture. We need to be present, to represent the truth and beauty of God’s design and of God’s redemption. When we are present good things can happen. We don’t individually become heroes. We’re just quietly effective for God as ordinary members of society.

Before I give some examples let me ask you to consider another Scripture where Paul talks about individuals and authorities, 1 Timothy 2:1-4. Paul says “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Notice the flow. First, you’re praying for kings and all others in authority. Second, this is so we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is pretty much the image of a Christian who is submitted to a reasonably decent culture and government. Third though, notice that Paul links this to evangelistic effectiveness: this submission allows God’s will to be done, that people are saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. The benefit of submission then, is the same we saw at the end of last week’s diamond text: our light to so shine before men that they might see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Of course, civil disobedience and even martyrdom are lights of another kind to a culture, but the point I want to make is that the “yeah” of wherever-possible submission is also effective Christian witness.

I believe the effective witness of culture-embedded Christians has led to revival. We can go all the way back to the earliest church and see this. It’s true on the one hand that history tells us “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” When believers take a stand against ungodly culture and authority, it does witness to God. That’s what martyr means. But it’s also true, historically, that Christians became known for providing care where others wouldn’t and for loving each other and that was incredibly attractive in the world-wide Roman and Greek cultures. They loved their neighbors and so won them to Christ.

In the First Great Awakening of the 1740's God moved across the thirteen colonies bringing not only new commitment to himself, but new commitment to personal morality and love of neighbor. It was a community-by-community, church-by-church movement that changed people where they were and where they lived. There were a few heroes of course, but for the most part this was just good neighbors telling their neighbors to come and hear the good news. That can't be done by hard-headed hard-hearted rebels against a culture, but only by those embedded in the culture.

Think of North and South Korea. We talked at the start of the message about the antagonism of the North Korean government toward believers. That authority structure requires believers to oppose it and in some cases be heroes. But in South Korea, with a very different culture, the church has flourished, growing from 1 percent of the population to almost 30 percent in a century. Even the Wikipedia article on religion in South Korea says that it is the Christian ideal of men and women made in the image of God that has appealed to the average South Korean. In the same way the house church movement in China has normally kept a low profile relative to the Communist government, submitting as much as possible, but has been quietly effective in reaching the people house to house. Would it have done this without Romans 13? I'm not sure.

Finally, I want to come back to "The Jesus Revolution." I guess I'd never figured out that my conversion was part of a revival, but it was. The Jesus movement, as we called it, was the largest religious revival in the U.S. in over a hundred years. It wasn't done by revolution against the government, but by a revolution in loving those who needed to hear the good news. The hippies were the revolutionaries, not submitting to authority, pushing for drugs and so-called free love and burning down the cities. But the Jesus movement was a counter-revolution. Not denying injustice but focusing on the needs of that troubled generation. Not wanting to burn things down but to build people up. It was a quiet and effective infiltration of a generation that desperately needed Jesus.

This, I think, is the "yeah" of submission to authority. It's not always possible, but where it is the church, living loving and godly lives, can call people to the greatest revolution of all, faith in Jesus Christ. It can call people into a culture of love and godliness. It's a way of loving your neighbor, and sharing their burden that is wonderfully if quietly effective. In this model there are no heroes except Jesus, but he is the one everyone around us really needs to see. Paul is telling the believers in Rome, and us, that you shouldn't strive to be an agitator. When we return to Romans after Easter, we'll see that what he really wants from us is to live out the law of love.