

Main Idea: God details two issues concerning the Christian's response to government in Romans 13:1-7.

- I. God gives us a responsibility (1a).
  - A. It's explained in the Bible.
    1. We are to be subject to civil authority.
    2. We are to obey civil authority.
  - B. It's illustrated in church history.
    1. Justin: "We worship only God, but in other things we will gladly serve you."
    2. Tertullian: "Caesar is more ours than yours because our God appointed him."
- II. God gives us reasons (1b-4).
  - A. God ordained civil authority (1b).
    1. God puts the government in place.
    2. God puts the government officials in place.
  - B. God ordained civil punishment (2).
    1. To rebel is to resist God's authority.
    2. To rebel is to bring judgment on yourself.
  - C. God ordained a civil pattern (3-4).
    1. Do right, and be commended.
    2. Do wrong, and be punished.

The Bottom Line: Our goal is to make the gospel attractive.

To test my response to civil authorities...

1. Are my actions making the gospel attractive?
2. Are my attitudes making the gospel attractive?

Several years ago, an explosion caused by a bomb rocked an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, killing an off-duty police officer and critically injuring a nurse. The blast at the New Woman All Women Health Care clinic came just a week after our nation observed the 25th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

About a year before that, two bombs went off an hour apart at a clinic in Atlanta, injuring seven. Five people have been shot to death at abortion clinics, one in 1993 and four in 1994. USA Today reported that Menzor Chadwick, a regular anti-abortion protester at the Birmingham New Woman clinic, was across the street when the explosion happened and was questioned about the incident. David Lackey, an anti-abortion leader who went to the scene called the explosion a "heinous act."

Some of you may recall when, back in June 1997, Timothy McVeigh was found guilty of bombing the Oklahoma City federal building, the worst act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history. A jury of seven men and five women issued guilty verdicts on all 11 federal counts for planning and executing the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995. 168 people died in the bombing.

Three years earlier, McVeigh had written a letter to the *Union-Sun & Journal* of Lockport, N.Y. (pub. Feb. 11, 1992) in which he criticized taxes, the rise of crime, the salaries of politicians, and the direction of our government. McVeigh wrote:

"What is it going to take to open the eyes of our elected officials? America is in serious decline!... Is Civil War Imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that. But it might."

Theodore Kaczynski, the man known as the *Unabomber*, was sentenced to life in prison without parole for pleading guilty to 13 federal charges covering five bombings

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\*\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the message in the Romans series 2/1/98.

including two deaths. The 55-year-old mathematics professor-turned-hermit terrorized the nation for 18 years, having once written a 35,000-word, anti-technology manifesto which newspapers published in September 1995.

Those events happened three decades ago. The frustration level across our land has only gone up since. Which makes this question vital for us to consider.

What is the right way to respond to civil government, particularly when government does not live up to our expectations? What is the *Christian* response towards government?

God Himself addresses this question for us in His Word, and perhaps no place more succinctly and clearly than in Romans 13. We're going to spend three messages or so working through this significant chapter.

This evening we begin in Romans 13:1-4, a passage that clarifies for us two issues concerning a God-honoring response to government. We're given a God-given responsibility in verse 1, and then three God-given reasons in verses 1b-3.

### I. God gives us a responsibility (1a).

What is it? We need not wonder because...

**A. It's explained in the Bible.** 1 Timothy 2:1-2 gives us this instruction, "I urge, therefore, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

God expects us to pray for our leaders. But praying is not all we're to do. In Romans 13:1, Paul takes us a step further, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities (NIV)." In the ESV, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities."

What does Paul mean by "submit/be subject" here? The Greek word is literally "to place under, to rank under." It was used of a soldier's absolute obedience to a commanding officer. "Submitting" sums up our God-given responsibility to government

It's interesting that Romans 12 deals with the Christian and the church, whereas Romans 13 addresses the Christian in secular society. Romans 12 ends, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." In Romans 13 Paul begins to show us how to overcome evil, not in the church, but out in the world.

Submitting includes two obligations for us.

*1. We are to be subject to civil authority.* The actual Greek order of the sentence reads, "Every soul to the authorities ruling be subject." The emphasis is on the fact that there are no exceptions. *Every* person, especially every *Christian*, is to be subject to the authorities that be.

This was a pressing issue for the Roman Church. And for us. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Rome, in AD 57 when Paul wrote this letter. The recipients of this letter lived in the capital city of the mighty Roman empire. It wasn't easy to live for Christ under a pagan emperor who endorsed idol worship, even emperor worship.

Nero, who ruled from A.D. 54-68 was a ruthless, immoral tyrant (who died at the age of 31). It is historically documented that in the first five years of Nero's reign, Rome was a hotbed of political intrigue, murder plots, and assassinations. Nero himself eliminated Britannicus and Agrippina, and later banished his wife, Octavia, and had her killed.

What are we supposed to do if our government is corrupt? What Paul tells us is indeed quite staggering, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God." Think who that includes. Hitler, Mao, Saddam Hussein, and Nero.

Ultimately, the issue isn't the person in charge. The issue is who put him (or her) there. God is sovereign, and a sovereign God makes no mistakes. Paul says we are to be subject to civil authority, even though he himself lived himself under a godless emperor.

"Submitting" involves a second obligation.

2. *We are to obey civil authority.* That the verb "submit" ("be subject" in the KJV) includes the aspect of obedience is supported by Titus 3:1 where Paul elaborates, "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men."

You may wonder why Paul would even need to address the topic of civil obedience with Christians. It's because it was not then, nor is it now a moot issue in Christian circles.

A key factor for Paul was the Jewish background of Christianity. Historian William Barclay explains:

The Jews were notoriously rebellious. Palestine, especially Galilee, was constantly seething with insurrection. Above all there were the Zealots; there were convinced that there was no king for the Jews but God; and that no tribute must be paid to anyone except to God. Nor were they content with anything like a passive resistance. They believed that God would not be helping them unless they embarked on violent action to help themselves. Their aim was to make any civil government impossible. They were known as the dagger-bearers. They were fanatical nationalists sworn to terrorist methods. Not only did they use terrorism towards the Roman government; they also wrecked the houses and burned the crops and assassinated the families of their own fellow-Jews who paid tribute to the Roman government.<sup>2</sup>

I remind you that from the Church's beginning, the Romans viewed Christianity as a Jewish sect. For its first decade the Church was basically Jewish. Though not all Jewish Christians were Zealots prior to conversion, all had been influenced by anti-Roman sentiment.

Now two key questions. One, must we always *agree* with the government in order to submit to it? No. A good example is Paul in Acts 24:25. There Paul stood on trial before Governor Felix. There he speaks respectfully and courteously, but truthfully. He looks Felix in the eye, and to this leader who was living in adultery with Drusilla, Paul "discoursed on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come." He respected the man, but disagreed with his lifestyle.

A second question. Must we always *obey* the civil authorities? Yes, with one exception. When the civil authorities ask us to violate God's authority. When that happens, we must say with Peter (Acts 5:29), "We must obey God rather than men," (and be prepared to accept the civil consequence for such disobedience. Peter did and was flogged (Acts 4:40).

Daniel is another powerful example. Daniel, who himself was a public servant with a high level government position, broke the law in order to pray, and was cast into the lion's den.

But exceptions aside, God's Word is clear. God holds us responsible to be subject to civil authorities. It's explained in the Bible. In addition...

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, p. 173.

**B. It's illustrated in church history.** Though the Bible, not tradition, is our sole authority, and though we are to live by what God says, not man, we can profit by considering how Christians before us have applied Romans 13. Here are two examples.

1. *Justin Martyr*: This church leader who lived in the second century in a time of persecution wrote this defense to the Emperor: "Everywhere, we, more readily than all men, endeavor to pay to those appointed by you the taxes, both ordinary and extraordinary, as we have been taught by Jesus. *We worship only God, but in other things we will gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that, with your kingly power, you may be found to possess also sound judgment (Apology 1:17).*"<sup>3</sup>

2. *Tertullian*: He wrote the following around 200 A.D. In it he is defending Christianity in terms of its relation to government (*Apology 30*): "We offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God, whose favor, beyond all other things, they must themselves desire...Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection for the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest-- whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish." Tertullian goes on to say that the Christian cannot but look up to the emperor because he "is called by our Lord to his office." And he ends by saying that "*Caesar is more ours than yours because our God appointed him.*"

Know this. Throughout church history, it has been the consistent and official teaching of the Church to give obedience to, and offer prayers for the civil authorities. Even when the person holding that power was a tyrant like Nero.

Let this sink in. If you are a Christian, the Lord calls you to submit to the civil authorities. "Which ones?" you ask. The term "governing authorities" in verse 1 uses a phrase best translated as "the powers that be." Paul has in mind all levels of authority, as Ray Stedman points out, "all the way down to the local dog catcher."

But why must we submit, especially if government is corrupt? That's the second issue Paul addresses. God gave us a responsibility, and...

## II. God gives us reasons (1b-4).

There are three.

**A. God ordained civil authority (1b).** "For there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God (NIV)." As Americans we love to think that democracy is the form of government that God endorses. But you can't establish that from Scripture.

When Paul wrote this letter, the Roman world had already passed through several forms of government. It had been a monarchy, a republic, a principality, and now it was an empire (Stedman, 137). Nero had just begun to rule as Rome's fifth emperor.

So which is the best? A monarchy? A republic? A democracy? The Bible's answer is not necessarily any one of those. Ray Stedman points out (136), "The best form of government for a nation is whatever God has brought into being. This is best for that nation's particular place and time in history."

The Lord has given me the privilege to spend time with believers in many different countries, functioning under various types of governments. Albania and Romania were controlled by communist dictators not that long ago. PNG called itself a Christian nation,

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<sup>3</sup>taken from William Barclay, *Romans*, p. 172.

but certainly had its share of corruption. There's Peru, Brazil, Thailand (a monarchy), and Nepal.

I remember an interesting experience when I was in Ukraine, where we traveled yearly for about five years. I watched the brothers get out their photo albums to show me their pictures. There they stood in the military uniforms, serving in the former USSR. "Those men can't be Christians, can they?" When I was growing up, the USSR was our cold war enemy.

But that was the government that existed where these men lived. And God ordains civil authority, all of it. Specifically, that means two things according to verse 1.

1. *God puts the government in place.* "For there is no power but of God." The Bible teaches that God has instituted four authorities. He put the Church over all believers. He put parents over all children. He put masters over all employees. And He put the government over all citizens. God puts the government in place. Secondly...

2. *God puts the government officials in place.* This goes a step further. Yes, God is behind the form of government, but He's also the people in government. I think that's what Paul has in mind in the final phrase of verse 1, "The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Do you view our government officials that way? Do you know why President Biden is our leader? Because God ordained it. Why is George Dewine our governor? Because God put him there. Let that sink in. The reason we should submit to government's authority and to the people in government is because God ordained civil authority.

The issue is not, "I'll support him because I voted for him, and he's my political party." And certainly not, "I'll submit because I like him." The fact that God ordained our civil authority is reason enough to submit.

R. C. Sproul, who is in heaven now, once penned these helpful words in an article he wrote entitled, "What Is a Christian's Responsibility to Government?":

The great theologian Augustine said that government is a necessary evil, that it is necessary because of evil. And most theologians in the history of the church have said that human evil is the reason even corrupt government is better than no government at all. The function of government is to restrain evil and to maintain, uphold, and protect the sanctity of life and of property...

I personally believe in a separation of spheres of authority between the church and state. I think it is a marvelous structure in the United States of America that does not allow for the state to rule the church or the church to rule the state. Historically that meant that the church was answerable to God and the state was answerable to God. Separation of church and state assumed a division of labor; the church has its job, and the state has its job. The church is not to maintain a standing army, and the state is not to do evangelism or to administer the sacraments. Nevertheless, they are both regarded as being under God.

Unfortunately, in today's culture separation of church and state means separation of state and God, as if the state and the government were answerable to no one but themselves--as if the government didn't have to respond to God. But God monitors governments; God raises them up and brings them down. Every human government is accountable to God and is accountable to maintain its affairs with justice and with righteousness. When the government is no longer acting justly and no longer protecting life—sanctioning [abortions](#), for example—then it is the task of the church

to be the prophetic voice, to call the state to task and tell the state to repent and do what God commands it to do.<sup>4</sup>

God ordained civil authority. Here's a second reason.

**B. God ordained civil punishment (2).** "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." Here's the opposite of submitting. It's rebelling, which literally means "to set oneself against." To not do what the government asks because I don't like it is to rebel.

"Well, I think the whole tax system is corrupt, so I'm not going to pay my taxes."

Then work to change the tax system, but don't violate it. The same goes for copyright laws, traffic laws, and others. To say, "I don't like that law," doesn't justify my disobedience to it. God ordained civil authority and civil punishment. With that foundation, Paul next draws two conclusions.

1. *To rebel is to resist God's authority.* Verse 2 again (KJV), "Whosoever resists the power, resists the ordinance of God." And what happens if we do rebel?

2. *To rebel is to bring judgment on yourself.* Verse 2 concludes, "And they that resist shall receive to themselves judgment." Judgment, that is, from the government for breaking the law.

Motivation is key. What's our motivation in this civil obedience? It's this. When we as Christians submit to government, it makes Christianity attractive. But when we take the law into our own hands, it casts an ugly shadow on the gospel. Don't you cringe when the media sticks a microphone into the face of a fanatic who has just shot an abortion clinic doctor, and the killer says, "God told me to do it..."? The cause of Christ is harmed by civil disobedience, not to mention moral disobedience, when it's done in the name of God.

God ordained civil authority. God ordained civil punishment. Now a third reason we are called to submit.

**C. God ordained a civil pattern (3-4).** We see the pattern in verses 3-4 (NIV), "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 he will commend you. For he is God's servant [*diakonos*] to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

There's a civil pattern here, a general rule that God has established. Here it is.

1. *Do right, and be commended.* Are there exceptions? Yes, but the general rule holds. If you do right, you will be in the good graces of the government.

Conversely, there's another side to this.

2. *Do wrong, and be punished.* Beloved, the issue for us isn't what the polls say. Nor what the media tells us. Nor our political party of choice. Our sole concern must be *what is right*. Paul says, "Christian, make it your pattern to do what is *right*. Respect the government. Pay your taxes. Obey the laws."

Jesus put it this way, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's (Matt. 22:21)."

Peter offers this slant in 1 Peter 2:13-17, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christians-and-government>

as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."

Several years ago, when looking into a computer purchase, a mail-order salesperson said to me, "Do you have a friend in Kentucky? If that person makes the purchase, you can get around the sales tax, and save yourself some money."

About the same time, we were looking into changing health insurance companies. An agent suggested that it would be to our advantage to be vague on the application when it came to reporting my wife's preexisting condition. To our advantage? That's not the most important issue, is it? God's Word says that what should matter most to us is what is *good* and *right*.

Think carefully now. God's Word gives us three reasons why we are to submit ourselves to government. God ordained civil authority. God ordained civil punishment. God ordained a civil pattern. Do right whenever possible, never wrong, so that in all things we make the gospel of our Savior attractive to a world that needs Him.

The Bottom Line: Our goal is to make the gospel attractive.

A lot of people pay their taxes for no other reason than to avoid an audit by the IRS. We have a higher motivation. It's the gospel. We want to live our lives in such a way as to make the gospel attractive.

In Titus 2 Paul gives specific instruction for older men and women, for younger men and women, and for slaves. Titus was to teach them how to live, with this motivation in mind (2:10), "...so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."

That's the issue for us--living lives that make the gospel attractive. A proper response to civil authority does that. How attractive is your life making the gospel? Here's a test. To test my response to civil authorities, I need to ask two questions.

1. *Are my actions making the gospel attractive?* Beloved, the Lord Jesus lived a perfect life, and sacrificed His life to make atonement for our sins. We have repented and believed in Him, and now belong to Him. We have surrendered our lives as living sacrifices to Him (12:1). It's only natural for us then to live lives that make the good news of Christ attractive.

Are we doing that? Or are there blemishes in our lives, corners we've been cutting, gray areas we've been moving in that are displeasing to the Savior? If so, let's confess these actions to Him even now, and determine to make things right and to do what's right from here on.

But making the gospel attractive involves more than actions, so a second question...

2. *Are my attitudes making the gospel attractive?* It's so easy to develop a sour, critical attitude towards government. Especially at tax time. Let's allow the Spirit to give us the kind of attitudes that make our Savior attractive to the onlooking world.

Next time: What does God expect of the government? What practically must we do if we are to submit to the government? We'll see as we develop verses 5-7.