

Main Idea: In Romans 13:1-7, God clarifies two expectations He wants us to know regarding civil authority.

- I. God tells us what He expects of those *in* authority.
  - A. He gives specific roles.
    - 1. The authority is God's institution (2).
    - 2. The authority is God's servant (4).
    - 3. The authority is God's avenger (4).
    - 4. The authority is God's minister (6).
  - B. He gives specific responsibilities.
    - 1. The authority is to commend those who do right (3).
    - 2. The authority is to punish those who do wrong (4).
- II. God tells us what He expects of those *under* authority.
  - A. In simple terms, we are to submit (5).
    - 1. One motivator is the fear of punishment.
    - 2. A better motivator is conscience.
  - B. In specific terms, we are to support (6-7).
    - 1. We are to pay what we owe.
    - 2. We are to pay with the Lord in mind.

The Bottom Line: Our aim must be the glory of God.

- 1. When I do what's right, Christ is honored.
- 2. When I don't, He's not.

Do you know what the Holocaust is? Several years ago, in a Barbara Walters special on the deterioration of American education, a majority of high school students told ABC interviewers that they thought the Holocaust was a Jewish holiday. Many of the same students could not locate the United States on a world map.

Professors Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn conducted a survey of high school students in 1986. They discovered that 31.9% did not know that Columbus reached the New World before 1750; 30% could not place the Civil War in the proper half century; 52.7% had "heard of" President Kennedy's famous "ask not" dictum, but 29.2% attributed it to Teddy Roosevelt.

The lack of knowledge about our country is but one problem. It's one thing to not know. It's another thing to not *care*.

There seems to be a prevailing and spreading attitude of cynicism towards the establishment. "If it doesn't affect me, who cares?" is the spirit of the age. People are fed up with scandals in government, and the responses are diverse, from those who would wash their hands of the whole thing, to those who would take matters into their own hands with the use of violence.

And what about us? As God's people, what should be our attitude towards government? Two weeks ago, we began a two-part look at "The Christian's Response to Government" from Romans 13. Our aim is to learn to view the situation from God's perspective.

Review from last time: God details two issues concerning the Christian's response to government in Romans 13:1-7.

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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 February 1998.

- 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?

I received helpful feedback after our last message regarding the word "ordain". What does it mean to say that God "ordains" governments and rulers?

Specifically, in the KJV, verse 1 reads, "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."

What does it mean to say that the powers that be are *ordained by God*?

The ESV says, "**instituted** by God." The NIV says, "**established** by God." The Greek word is *tasso*, which can mean, "designate, determine, arrange, appoint."

Listen to Psalm 8:3 (ESV), "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have **set in place**..." In the AV, it says "which thou has **ordained**."

God set the stars in place. All stars, or just some of them. God set the powers that be in place. Is this referring to all of them, or just the good ones? There's no qualifier in Romans 13:1. There is "no power but of God." They are all instituted, established, set in place, ordained, by God.

This then raises other questions. What about Hitler, or Saddam, or Stalin? Did God set them in place?" And if so, what about verses like these?

James 1:13 says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."

1 John 1:5 "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

God is holy and hates sin. How then can we say that He ordains/puts in place a ruler who causes evil? How can He do that and not be responsible for the evil they commit?

These are not easy questions to answer. There's a spectrum of words we could use. On the one end, there's the word ALLOW. As in, God allows wicked rulers to exist. We

know that God allows evil in His world, as well as evil rulers. But does He do more than merely allow them to exist?

On the other end, there's the word CAUSE. As in, God causes evil rulers to exist and causes them to commit evil. We know that God does not CAUSE evil.

So what word best depicts how God interacts with evil rulers in this world?

Allow > Ordain/establish >Cause

Thankfully, God Himself uses language in His Word that helps us. Listen to these texts.

Daniel 2:21 says, "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings..." When Daniel says this, he has in mind good kings like David, and not so good kings like Nebuchadnezzar, a dictator who killed thousands. That's helpful biblical language for us to use. God *sets up kings*.

In Daniel 2:37, Nebuchadnezzar receives this message from Daniel, "You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven *has given the kingdom*, the power, and the might, and the glory." That too is helpful biblical language. God *gives* kingdoms to rulers, including pagan rulers like Nebuchadnezzar.

In Daniel 4:17, Daniel gives this message to Nebuchadnezzar, just before he is humbled and begins to eat grass like an animal. "The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and *sets over it* the lowliest of men." God *sets over a kingdom* the ruler He chooses.

Why would set up and give kingdoms to wicked rulers?

Listen to a prayer that the early church spoke to God at a time when wicked ruling officials commanded them not to talk about Jesus any more. Acts 4:27–28 says, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,<sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

This prayer gives us such a helpful perspective. According to the members of the early church who were praying that day long ago, why did Jesus die? They cite two reasons.

One, He died because Herod and Pilate and other leaders did the unthinkable. They murdered Him. They killed the Son of God.

The second reason? These wicked leaders did, says this prayer, "whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

Why would God put in place wicked rulers who obviously do things that do not please Him? The answer is, because He has something greater in mind that does please Him very much.

I appreciate the ministry of John Piper. I searched his "Ask Pastor John" site, in which he addressed the question, "Is Violent Crime Under God's Providence?" It's a helpful article, and here's how he concludes it:<sup>2</sup>

The Bible says that the sins of his murderers — Herod, Pilate, soldiers, mobs — their sins in murdering Jesus were predestined and planned by God. He did this, God did this, without himself sinning. He can govern, rule, oversee, control, guide, the evils of the world without being evil.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-violent-crime-under-gods-providence>

If God had not planned the death of his Son, neither your sins nor mine would be forgiven. God orchestrated the worst sins that ever happened in the murder of his Son so that you and I, and millions of those who believe on Christ, would be saved from destruction and given eternal joy. [Romans 5:8](#) says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us," which means that we simply could not know the depths of God's love without the death of Christ. There would be no death of Christ without sin and suffering and the sovereignty of God. So, when you feel that you can't understand why God does what he does, let your heart rest here: the worst suffering and the deepest sovereignty meet at the point of greatest love — the cross of Christ. So rest there.

Main idea of this message: In Romans 13:1-7, God clarifies two expectations He wants us to know regarding civil authority. The first grows out of our last study in verses 1-4.

### I. God tells us what He expects of those *in* authority.

If you watch the news, there's lots of talk about unmet expectations. It doesn't matter which side of the aisle speaking. Everybody has expectations about what government should be doing, and everybody has reasons for why government isn't meeting those expectations.

The real question is, what does God expect of government? God tells us in Romans 13. There He gives civil rulers two things.

**A. He gives specific roles.** In our text Paul uses four different words to describe how God views civil authority.

1. *The authority is God's institution (2).* For context, we begin in verse 1 (NIV), "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has *instituted*." The Greek word translated "instituted" (2) is *diatage*. It's actually a noun, as the KJV reveals, "Whosoever, therefore resists the power resists the *ordinance* of God."

God's Word calls the government God's ordinance, God's institution. This is a fundamental truth. The state is God's divinely ordained instrument. Yes, ideally, people should be able to live together in society bound by human love. But *depraved* people cannot. The cement which keeps us together is the state. Without civil authority, society would crumble instantly.

In Paul's day, the authority was the Roman Empire. Though pagan, and in fact openly hostile to Christianity at times, Rome was God's institution. It was an instrument in the hand of God, which the Lord used to prevent the world from chaos. Whether a pagan government recognizes it, the fact remains. It's doing God's work.

Again, think of the first century setting. The Roman Empire prided itself in *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace. But God used *Pax Romana* to make the early missionary endeavors of the Church possible. That's because the authority is God's institution.

2. *The authority is God's servant (4).* We see the second key word in verse 4, "For he is God's *servant* to do you good." God's *diakonos*. Let that sink in. The government leader is himself under authority. God's authority. God is the master; he is the servant. That means the person in government should think, "What would God want me to do?" And indeed, even if he doesn't think that way, that's what God holds him

accountable for. Not whether the constituents like his voting record. Not what the polls say the majority wants. Not what would bring the most benefit to his district. But what action best reflects the will of God, the Master. The authority is God's servant.

3. *The authority is God's avenger (4)*. Verse 4 concludes, "But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword [i.e. the symbol of Roman authority] for nothing. He is God's servant, an *agent of wrath* to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Paul calls the ruler *ekdikos*, God's avenger. There's no question that force is a deterrent. To those intent on evil, the fear of force works to keep their evil deeds in check.

Which raises the question, "What about capital punishment?" Capital punishment was established by God in Genesis 9:5-6, and in my judgment, has not been abolished. Paul says the ruler "does not bear the sword for nothing." The sword is the symbol of the right to use force, even to the point of taking life. Remember, only God has the right to take life. He also has the right to establish human channels for doing this. Which is what He has done.

4. *The authority is God's minister (6)*. "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's *servants*." Though translated in the NIV as "servant," Paul actually uses a different Greek word from the term in verse 4. The ruler is God's *leitourgoi*. He is God's public minister.

It's interesting that this is a word usually reserved for those giving service of a priestly nature. Typically it refers to religious service, but here it depicts what governments do. You see, the authority is God's minister to do us good.

A word of application. It's common to hear people criticizing the government. "If the government would just stay out of our lives, we'd all be a lot better off." Certainly, government can overstep its bounds, but we need government. God gave us government.

Scottish New Testament scholar, William Barclay, offers this astute observation (174), "To the state ordinary people owe a wide range of services which individually they could not enjoy. It would be impossible for every man to have his own water, light, sewage, transport system. These things are obtainable only when men agree to live together. And it would be quite wrong for a man to enjoy everything the state provides and to refuse all responsibility to it."

So those four words sum up the roles God intends government to fill. The civil authority is God's institution, servant, avenger, and public minister. That's what God expects those in authority to *be*. Now let's consider what He expects them to *do*.

**B. He gives specific responsibilities.** The Preamble of the Constitution of the United States outlines some responsibilities, "In order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty..."

That's how our forefathers viewed governmental responsibility. In Romans 13, Paul summed it up in different terms. Simply put, God has given civil authority two tasks.

1. *The authority is to commend those who do right (3)*. "Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you." Augustine said, "Without justice, what are kingdoms but great gangs of robbers?" God expects the civil authority to commend what is right and those who do right. Secondly...

2. *The authority is to punish those who do wrong (4).* "For he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that does evil (KJV)." It is the ruler's responsibility to hold terror for wrong doers.

Why isn't there total chaos in society? It isn't because everyone loves to do what is right, but because even pagan people fear the consequences of doing wrong. Your neighbor may like the RV that's sitting in your driveway, but the threat of fifteen years behind bars deters him from taking it!

By God's design, government is supposed to promote what is right and punish what is wrong. Beloved, we are in grave danger today as a nation because we are violating the biblical mandate. We need to repent. We need to pray that our government leaders will repent and accept their God-given roles and responsibilities.

Thought not perfect, the example of Abraham Lincoln reflects the biblical model. Allow me to quote Representative Tom Coburn, this time in his reference to Lincoln:<sup>3</sup>

"During Lincoln's train ride to Washington in 1861 the press labeled him a disgrace to the nation. He had received only 40% of the popular vote and had little administrative experience. This backwoods boy from Illinois lacked the necessary intelligence and education to lead the nation through its crisis.

"Lincoln, however, was motivated by an unshakable conviction that the Union must be preserved at all costs because God had a magnificent work for America to perform in the world. His resolve was evident early in his administration when he wrote, 'I expect to maintain this contest until successful or until I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.'

"Lincoln faced a difficult reelection bid in 1864. The Union army had suffered astronomical casualties, averaging 10,000 per month for four years. His opponent, General George B. McClellan, favored a negotiated peace, even if it meant the breakup of the Union and the continuation of slavery...

"Lincoln refused to mirror the position of his opponent, won reelection and led the Union to victory. Lincoln faced enormous political pressure throughout his presidency, but he never wavered in his mission. Had he caved in to the pressure the results would have been catastrophic for the United States and the world."

But what happens when the government does *not* do what God expects? That was the very situation which Paul faced when he penned Romans. Emperor Nero was on the throne. Nero was not only a cruel tyrant, but a corrupt, self-focused dictator. So when you have a corrupt leader in charge, it's okay to disobey him, right? Wrong. We've seen the first expectation--what God expects of those *in* authority. Now a second.

## II. God tells us what He expects of those *under* authority.

That's us. What does the Lord expect of us in response to government?

**A. In simple terms, we are to submit (5).** "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." Simply put, we are to *submit (hupotasso)*--it means to place or rank under; to obey. In Ephesians 5:21, it depicts what all Christians are to do with one another, and in the next verse (22) expresses the responsibility of a wife to her husband. Submitting is not a matter of worth, but of function. In light of who government is, and the job God has

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<sup>3</sup>AFA Journal, p. 19.

given government to do, we are to submit to it. It is "necessary" to do so. In case you're not convinced, Paul spells out two motivators in verse 5.

1. *One motivator is the fear of punishment.* "It is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment." The KJV says, "Not only for *wrath*." It just makes sense. If you want to stay out of trouble and save yourself a lot of grief, obey the civil authorities. That's one motivator, the fear of punishment.

2. *A better motivator is conscience.* "It is necessary to submit...not only because of possible punishment but also because of *conscience*." The same word appears in 1 Peter 2:19, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under unjust suffering because he is conscious of God."

You see, as Christians, we must operate on a higher plane. The issue for us isn't, "What can I get away with?", but "What is right?" It's not how close to the edge can I get, but what is *right*? We are to obey "for conscience sake."

Your conscience can be a great ally. The Spirit can use His Word to prick it, and to guide us in decision-making. But it can become seared. It can become hardened and dulled so that it doesn't work effectively. How? By doing wrong over and over.

The first time you falsify your Schedule C income, it bothers you greatly. You lay awake all night, and wake up in a cold sweat. The second time you do it, you only toss and turn for a couple of hours. And then eventually, you do it without batting an eye. In fact, you convince yourself you should do it. It's the *right* thing to do, to cheat the government, to get back at the authorities for their corruption.

It doesn't take long for your conscience to become warped. Thankfully, a seared conscience can be restored, by the grace of God and the commitment to start doing right. *Every* time.

Frankly, in today's society, we can't assume people know what we're talking about when we use the word *right*. To say we must do what's *right* for conscience sake is very different from the common mentality, "What's right *for me*?" That's situation ethics. For us, the issue is what is right according to an objective standard external to us, a standard that God determines.

Let me illustrate how our world has redefined the term *right*. Think of a woman named Jane, who was struggling with guilt because she was having an affair. Sally said to her, "In light of what you've had to live with for the past ten years--that dead-beat husband of yours--you're doing the *right* thing. Maybe it'll knock some sense into his head." In Sally's mind, something is "right" if the outcome is desirable.

Another example. It's been a terrible year for Bob's business, and now it's time to send in his Social Security payment. It's also time for the vacation he promised his family months earlier. Bob decides to keep the money, falsify the income he reports, and take his vacation. He assures himself, "I'm a family man. Certainly God wants me to take care of my family. It's the *right* thing to do."

The last verse of Judges states (21:25), "Every man did what was *right* in his own eyes." Beloved, as followers of Christ, we are called to a higher standard. To be subject for conscience sake means the issue is not, "What do I think is right?", but "What does God say is right?" That's why when it comes to government, in simple terms, we are to submit.

**B. In specific terms, we are to support (6-7).** "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone

what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect; then respect; if honor, then honor."

Now here's a popular subject! *Taxes*. What does Paul teach us about paying taxes in verses 6-7? Two lessons.

1. *We are to pay what we owe.* Verse 7, "Render to all their dues." It's likely Paul has in mind Jesus' words, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's (Mk 12:17)." The verb "render" means "to give back, to return, to restore."

Why do we pay taxes? According to verse 6, it's to support those who do what we cannot do--invest their lives full time in matters we cannot address. Our tax money goes to support those who give their time to bring benefit to the community. We may not approve of all that is done with the money we pay in taxes, but to refuse to pay is to refuse to take seriously God's command.

What specifically are we to pay? Paul lists four items we owe. One, taxes (KJV "tribute")--it refers to tribute paid to a foreign ruler, as in Luke 20:22 in an incident referring to paying tribute to Caesar.

Two, revenue ("custom" in the AV)--it pertains to indirect taxation in the form of toll or custom duties (e.g.--what do you do when you go to Sam's Club and buy personal items on your business card? Do you pay tax?).

Three, we are to pay "respect" (AV "fear")--the Greek lexicon defines the term as "the profound veneration due to the highest persons in the state." This goes beyond the act and addresses the attitude. We owe government not just money, but respect and reverence.

And fourth, we are to give honor. Honor to whom? Paul doesn't clarify. Does he mean we're to honor the civil authorities? Certainly, the context would dictate that. But I think there's another overtone involved, which underscores a second lesson involved in paying taxes.

2. *We are to pay with the Lord in mind.* I've read that the U.S. government has a "Conscious Fund" for people who want to pay their debts to the government and yet remain anonymous. One particular city investigated some tax frauds and announced several citizens were going to be indicted. But they didn't release the names of who was to be indicted. That week (as Wiersbe tells the story, 557), a number of people visited City Hall to "straighten out their taxes"--and many of them weren't even on the indictment list!

Any citizen, Christian or non-Christian, can obey the law out of fear of the consequences, but a Christian ought to obey for conscience sake.

You see, the truth is, we are people who have not received what we deserve, aren't we? Christ died for us, took the wrath we deserved, and made atonement for our sins through His death and resurrection. When we spurned Him, He pursued us and brought us to Himself.

Don't miss the connection. Since we're people who haven't received what we deserved, we're not to give others what they deserve. We're to do what's right. That's why, whether government is corrupt or not, we must submit and do what is right.

The Bottom Line: Our aim must be the glory of God.

Beloved, we are living in a day in which respect for authority is low, and getting lower. But we have a great opportunity. There are two options before us.



1. *When I do what's right, Christ is honored.* Whose reputation is ultimately harmed when I ignore my conscience, cheat on my taxes, try to beat the system at toll booths, bad-mouth the president at coffee-break, and in short, refuse to do what's right? The *Lord's* reputation. And whose reputation is enhanced when we obey the government, keep the laws, pay our taxes, pray for our leaders, and determine to do what is right? The *Lord's*.

The choice is ours. As a Christian, when I do what's right, Christ is honored. But...

2. *When I don't, He's not.* About four decades after Paul penned Romans, a man named Clement penned another document in Rome. It was around the year A.D. 96 when Clement, a leader of the Roman church produced the book that bears his name, *I Clement*.

Clement could well remember the fierce terror of Nero's persecution thirty years earlier in the 60's, and had just faced the hostility of Emperor Domitian in the 90's when he wrote the following prayer. In his prayer, Clement modeled what Paul taught. I invite you to join me as I pray Clement's prayer:

"Guide our steps to walk in holiness and righteousness and singleness of heart, and to do those things that are good and acceptable in Thy sight, and in the sight of our rulers. Yes, Lord, cause Thy face to shine upon us in peace for our good, that we may be sheltered by Thy mighty hand and delivered from every sin by Thine outstretched arm. Deliver us from those who hate us wrongfully. Give concord and peace to us and to all who dwell on earth, as Thou didst to our fathers, when they called on Thee in faith and truth with holiness, while we render obedience to Thine almighty and most excellent name, and to our earthly rulers and governors.

"Thou, O Lord and Master, hast given them the power of sovereignty through Thine excellent and unspeakable might, that we, knowing the glory and honor which Thou has given them, may submit ourselves to them, in nothing resisting Thy will. Grant them therefore, O Lord, health, peace, concord and stability, that they may without failure administer the government which Thou hast committed to them. For Thou, O heavenly Master, King of the ages, dost give to the sons of men glory and honor and power over all things that are in the earth. Do Thou, O Lord, direct their counsel according to what is good and acceptable in Thy sight, that they, administering in peace and gentleness with godliness the power which Thou hast committed to them, may obtain Thy favor."<sup>4</sup>

Dear friends, the church in Rome gave serious attention to Romans 13. So must we.

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<sup>4</sup>*I Clement* lx. 2-lxi.2, in F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, p. 235.