

Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 13:1-7 – Submission to Authority Sermon Notes



Introduction

In the previous chapter of Romans Paul dealt with Christian ethics (how we should interact with others). In this chapter he deals with Christian politics (how we should interact with those in authority over us). Remember that the majority of early Christians were converts from Judaism and the church members in Rome to whom Paul is writing this letter were predominantly converted Jews. The Jews had a long history of resisting the rule of any foreign king, believing that God alone was their king. This, in fact, is the major reason that all Jews had previously been kicked-out of Rome by the Emperor Claudius (see [Acts 18:2](#)).

At the time of the writing of this letter Claudius had already been assassinated by poisoning and his son Nero was the Emperor. And even though Nero had welcomed the Jews back into Rome, he had no love for them and this was particularly true for Christians, who many of that day considered to be a sect of Judaism.

So, to summarize what Paul is teaching us in this 13th chapter of Romans: no matter how corrupt our political rulers may be, they are not likely to be as self-serving or as powerful as many of the Roman emperors were. But our Ruler, our God, is greater than all other rulers and He wants to receive all the praise and glory. After all, He deserves it, for He is worthy! No matter what we may be going through or who may be causing us to suffer, let's always remember to keep our eyes focused on Him!

As we go through this 13th chapter of Romans, let's also keep in mind what the Apostle Peter said:

Be subject for the sake of the Lord to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do good. ... Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are crooked. For this

finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unrighteously. (1 Peter 2:13-14, 18-19)

Now, for Romans chapter 13.

Romans 13:1-2

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist have been appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists that authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Let's start off here with what it means to be in subjection. The Greek verb translated, "be in subjection to" is *hupotassō*, which means to place under in an orderly fashion. It is a military term referring to the submission of a soldier to one who out-ranks him. Paul has just taught Christians how to live in relation to others within the church. He now turns his attention to how we are to live in relation to our political rulers.

Given the circumstances and the times in which Paul was living, it's amazing that Paul would admonish us all to be subject to higher authorities. The authorities that Paul is talking about can be those in the workplace, where we are to submit to our bosses and upper management, or to civil government, whether local, regional, or national. Whoever they are, we are to place ourselves under the control of those in positions of authority over us. That means that they have the right to tell us what to do, and we are to obey what they tell us. Also notice that, according to Paul, those who are in positions of authority over us, whether on the job, in a church, or in civil government, have been put there by God. The only situation in which we are not to submit to them is when that authority commands us to do something contrary to what God has specifically commanded us to do, such as preaching the Gospel. Also, as Paul teaches us in his first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:1, 2), not only are we to submit ourselves to all authorities, we are commanded to pray for them as well! And Peter tells us that this applies whether they are good and gentle or harsh (1 Peter 2:18).

We need to pay attention to Paul's repeated use of the root word *tassō* (to set in an orderly arrangement). It is part of the expression "be subject to" and it is part of the words translated "resists" and "ordinance" in this verse. It is as if the Apostle Paul is making a stark contrast between what God has put in place and what mankind tries to put in place. Paul is very fond of using such a "play on words" to emphasize the point he is making. This is especially poignant given the fact that he spent the entire last chapter teaching us to be living sacrifices, not seeking our own will, but God's.

He warns us to submit ourselves to the authorities that are over us, whether religious, occupational, or civil. We are not to fight against authority, and here he tells us why:

Therefore whoever opposes the authority is standing against the orderly arrangement that God has set in place, and those who take such a stand will receive judgment on themselves. (**Romans 13:2** paraphrased)

In other words, if we contemplate resisting any authority that we are under, whether it is religious, occupational, or civil, we had better make absolutely certain that we are not resisting what God has put in place.

Romans 13:3-4

For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of that authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword in vain, for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

As we're going through this portion of Paul's letter to the predominantly Jewish Christians in Rome, let's keep in mind that it was written around 56 A.D. This was only 2 years after Nero, one of the worst Christian haters of all time, came to power as the Emperor of Rome. The Christians who were living in Rome at that time would have been under the most scrutiny of any group of people in the entire Empire, and you can be sure that their treatment was anything but fair. It is likely that Paul has included this portion of his letter for that very reason.

In fact, Paul's use of the term "rulers" here is very likely a direct reference to Nero and his henchmen. He says that the rulers are not a terror, or a fearsome thing, to the good works but to the bad ones. The purpose of any ruler is to promote good works in the people, not evil deeds. No ruler wants the people subject to him or her to be disobedient and lawless. In many cases, as was particularly true of the emperors of Rome, the rulers considered themselves above the law, but they still wanted their subjects to obey the laws. Paul now asks a rhetorical question, "Do you want to live without fear of the people in power?" And - his immediate response is, "Then do good and the rulers will praise you."

I can hear the Roman Christians' objection even now, "But Paul, this is Nero who is intentionally persecuting and killing Christians. You want us to submit to his authority?!" And Paul's answer would be an unequivocal, "Absolutely!" You see, God's plan for us includes submitting to all who are in authority over us whether they are benevolent or tyrannical. God is aware of our circumstances, and He is the one who will ultimately judge us (and those in authority over us). We will be punished for evil deeds and rewarded for good deeds. Keep in mind that submission and obedience are good deeds in God's eyes. But remember, we are always to obey the highest authority and that is God, Himself.

Now Paul says a curious thing. He says, "**for it is a minister of God.**" What is the "it" he is referring to? "It" is a reference to "the authority" spoken of in the previous verse, and it refers both to the position and to the person in that position. If Paul had used the word,

“he,” it would only be referring to the person. Keep in mind that according to Paul, those who are in authority are placed there as ministers, or servants, in God’s hierarchy and they are there for the purpose of doing good.

Now Paul addresses the other side of the coin. “**But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword in vain.**” The use of the word sword here is a reference to the ability of those in authority to execute judgment on those who disobey. It may, in fact, be a reference to the ability of civil government to execute capital punishment. Paul even supports this in his next phrase, “**for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.**”

Clearly, Paul is telling us that the power and authorization of those who are in authority over us comes directly from God for the purpose of keeping peace and punishing evildoers. But what about those in authority who are themselves evil; should we resist them? Let’s look at David as our example here. In **1 Samuel 24** he was being pursued by Saul, the King, even though David had done nothing to warrant this persecution. David and his men, hidden in a cave, had the opportunity to kill Saul when he came into the same cave to take a nap. David refused to kill Saul because he was God’s anointed.

So he said to his men, “Far be it from me because of Yahweh that I should do this thing to my lord, the anointed of Yahweh, to send forth my hand against him, since he is the anointed of Yahweh.” (**1 Samuel 24:6**)

If David refused to strike Saul because he was God’s anointed ruler, then we should also refuse to act against one who God has appointed to be over us.

Romans 13:5-7

Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of that wrath, but also because of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Paul now summarizes the two reasons why we should be submitted to the authorities over us. The first reason is “**because of that wrath.**” In other words, the authorities over us have the power and responsibility to punish disobedience. It is necessary for us to be subject to and to obey them, because if we refuse to submit to them and obey them, they have the God-granted power to punish us. The second reason we are to be submissive to authorities is “**because of conscience.**” Since we are completely aware of our responsibility to submit to authorities, we have a moral obligation to do so. In other words, in order to have a clear conscience before God, it is necessary that we submit ourselves to those in authority over us.

But what about Henry David Thoreau’s eloquent treatise *On Civil Disobedience*? Isn’t it sometimes appropriate, in fact isn’t it sometimes necessary to be part of civil disobedience? For Christians, according to the Apostle Paul, unless the authority is commanding us to act

contrary to the Word of God, the answer is No! We have another excellent example of this type of submission in the person of the prophet Daniel. He was taken captive to Babylon, forced to take on a new name and a new language. But he did not compromise when it came to obeying what God had commanded him to do, even though it nearly cost him his life. Not only did he survive, he prospered under the authority of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler, and he also prospered under the authority of the Medo-Persian king Darius who conquered Babylon. Daniel was submissive to the authorities over him because he was submitted to God. The only time Daniel refused to obey the Babylonian king was when he was told to eat food that God had forbidden him to eat. And even then, he did so in a non-combative manner (see [Daniel 1:8-17](#))

According to Paul, we have an obligation to submit to authorities who are over us whether those authorities are occupational, religious, or civil. We are to submit to them because they have been put in place by God and they are there for our protection. The only time we are to resist these authorities is when they command us to behave contrary to the way that God has commanded us to behave.

Paul's reasoning is that because they have been put in place by God, Himself, we submit ourselves and pay taxes to them. At the time this letter was written, this tribute (tax) was paid to Rome by a province or nation as the price of protection by Rome and as an acknowledgment of subjection to Rome. The Romans made all conquered provinces and nations pay this tribute, and within the church, it became a question of whether it was right to acknowledge this claim and submit to it. This question would be particularly important to the Jews and the Jewish Christians in Rome. But, based on the principle which the apostle has just enunciated, it was right to do it.

Did you catch what Paul has said about the governments of this world? He said that they are God's servants. They are in place to perform the public service. Thus, whether they acknowledge it or not, they are God's public servants and as such we are to submit ourselves to them.

So, the question of whether or not we should pay taxes to a corrupt, ungodly government is clearly answered by Paul. Yes, we should pay those taxes, because in doing so we are submitting to them and being obedient to God.

Since all of those in authority over us are put there by God, including those government officials who are corrupt or dishonest, we need to show the proper submission and respect to their position. The Apostle Paul says that we are to give them what we owe them. This is encompassed in four areas according to Paul. The first two areas are taxes imposed by authorities, including such taxes as sales tax, property tax, and local and federal income tax.

The next area, Paul tells us, is that we are to fear those to whom fear is due. That is, we should have a respectful fear of those who have the task of keeping the public peace and order. This most likely refers to police or military personnel who are assigned to keep the

public safe. And finally, Paul tells us that we are to give honor to whom honor is due. The difference between honor and fear is that honor denotes reverence, veneration, and respect, whereas fear is that which arises from the dread of punishment.

Jesus gave us a couple of good examples of these types of submission. The first is in [Matthew 22:15-21](#). In this passage Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees and Herodians, asking whether or not it is proper to give tribute to Caesar. Jesus' response was:

Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's.

The second example is at the end of the 17th chapter of Matthew. When the temple tax collectors came and challenged Peter about paying the drachma (the temple tax). Jesus told Peter to cast a fishing line into the sea and catch a fish. In the fish's mouth was found precisely the amount to pay the temple tax for both Peter and Jesus, and it was paid.

So What?

Let me summarize what Paul has been teaching us here. No matter how corrupt our political rulers may be, they are not likely to be as self-serving and corruptly powerful as many of the Roman emperors. But our Ruler, our God, is greater than all earthly rulers and He deserves to receive praise and glory, for He is worthy! No matter what we may be going through or who may be causing us to suffer, let's remember to always keep our eyes focused on Him!

Christians must respect those in authority over us even though they have power to do evil to us. We may not like them or what they stand for, and they may not like us and what we stand for, but we are to submit ourselves to them because of their position. Such submission pleases God.

We do not have to respect or even like those who are in authority over us, but we are to respect their position of authority and submit to them. Otherwise, we are resisting what God has put in place.

Now, having said all that, in this country, we do have a way to legally resist those in authority over us who would make life difficult for us. We have the right to speak-up against them and we have the ability (and right) to vote against them the next time they run for office. But even these things should be done in such a way that they bring glory to God.

Let's pray