

Submitting to worldly authority

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[0 : 00] Well, do please turn your Bibles to Romans chapter 13, and we'll be spending these moments in the first seven verses of Romans chapter 13.

I'll read from these verses, then we'll have the talk on these verses, and we'll sing at the end. So if you do need to get away to rush back to the office, or if you've got somewhere to be, please do slip away during the hymn at the end if you need to.

So do turn with me to Romans 13, and I'll read from verse 1. 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.

Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

For 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.

[1 : 20] For 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. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience.

For the same reason that you pay taxes. For the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. 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. Honour to whom honour is owed.

Authorities. I wonder what your first unspoken reaction to that word was as I read those verses.

[2 : 36] The authorities. I know what my first reaction certainly is. A certain resentment. A sense of the impending doom of being told what to do.

The governing authorities curb our freedoms. We rail against them, don't we? From the smallest child to the oldest pensioner.

We have a very real anti-authoritarian attitude, don't we? Think of how you feel when you see the traffic police coming down the road on the particular stretch that you like to go just that little bit faster on.

Think of how you feel when you see lots of your hard-earned cash disappearing to the treasury every month. Think of how you feel when you see a traffic warden.

You don't even need to have parked your car nearby. You don't even need to own a car. You just feel angry on behalf of the person who's getting the parking tickets.

[3 : 47] We don't like authorities one bit. Why can't I do exactly as I want to do? Why can't I build that extension to my house that I want to build?

Why all these planning regulations? Why can't I drive at 50 miles an hour on this road? Why must I pay so much tax? Now as Christians, we live under the authority of Christ our Lord.

Yes. But do we really have to submit to worldly authorities? That is the question that naturally arises as we look at these verses.

Do we really have to submit to worldly authority? After all, Paul was writing to a bunch of Christians under the rather cruel pagan Roman authorities.

This was Nero's empire that they were living under. And Paul was certainly not naive about the realities of living under the Roman authorities. He had experienced beatings at their hands.

[4 : 54] We might assume that given these Roman authorities at the time, Paul might provide some sort of way out for the Christians he was writing to.

Some way to avoid submitting to these brutes. Surely he would encourage them to be subversive and to oppose the governing authorities. However, much to our surprise, that is not what Paul says at all.

We might like to imagine pressing pause after verse 1. Okay, Paul, yes, we hear this command to be subject to the authorities. But then we imagine to ourselves that Paul goes on to list a whole bunch of qualifications and loopholes, ways out of having to submit.

But there's none of that. Paul gives us no loophole. Instead of giving us excuses from obeying, he gives us reasons too.

We can't press pause and imagine a different paragraph. We can't water down Paul's message. We can't wriggle off this hook. So we've landed here in the middle of a larger section of Paul's teaching. [6 : 15] What's going on here in this passage in Romans? Well, we're in the middle of a passage which is all about worship. Paul is dealing with what it means to give our lives, all of our lives, to God as living sacrifices in response to the glorious gospel of grace.

He starts in chapter 12 and those first few verses that are so familiar to us, about presenting our bodies as living sacrifices.

Paul is talking about worship, worship that pervades all of life, and that includes our attitude to our God-given earthly authorities.

Paul's main point here could not be clearer. Paul's main point is right there in verse 1.

Be subject to the governing authorities. This is the basic command given by Paul here. And the word he uses here to say subject, that is elsewhere translated as submit.

[7 : 24] As Christians, we are to submit, says Paul, to God. And this means submitting to worldly power as well, to our governing authorities. Now, yes, this is about submitting to our civil authorities.

We might think of the UK government, the Scottish government, Glasgow City Council. But we all seem to think more immediately as well. And consider those who have authority over us day by day.

It might be the directors of the company you work for, the head teacher at the school, or your boss, even the traffic warden. Everyone, notice that, let every person, everyone is to willingly place themselves under the authority of those who govern us.

This is part of our obedience to God. Now, do we see that coming? Does Paul really mean this?

Well, yes, he does.

Paul commands the Romans, and he commands us to be subject to the governing authorities. But why? Why does Paul say this?

[8 : 42] Well, he gives us two reasons in these verses. And the first one is because these governing authorities are God's servants. They are God's servants.

Look there, verse 2. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. These are God's servants. Now, when we think of the different sorts of governing authorities around the country, around the world, we perhaps don't immediately think that their authority, their legitimacy, comes from God.

It never really occurs to us, let alone Joe Bloggs on Sucky Hall Street. We would tend to point to a different source of authority. In Western democracies like our own, the mandate to rule comes from the people.

We might echo Abraham Lincoln's words, government of the people, for the people, by the people. Governments get their authority from people.

That's the democratic system we know, isn't it? But here, Paul points to a quite different source of authority. These governing authorities are God's authorities.

[10 : 03] Paul emphasizes this point seven times in these verses. So there in verse 1, those that have been instituted by God. Verse 2, those who resist the authorities resist whatever God has appointed.

Verse 4, for he is God's servant for your goods. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath. And in verse 6, the authorities are ministers of God.

Paul is emphatic again and again, pointing to the fact that these governing authorities are God's servants. Slightly shocking, isn't it?

Shocking to see Paul describing these authorities in this way. We find that hard enough in a Western, stable democracy like ours. Think of how the original readers would have felt sitting under the Roman authorities.

Imagine how they might have reacted. But the reality is, Paul says, there is no authority except from God. And those authorities that do exist have been instituted by him.

[11:16] So if we kick against our governing authorities, if we allow ourselves to be conformed to this world and harbor anti-authoritarian attitudes, we're really kicking against God's ordained order for his world.

Paul is quite plain, isn't he? There in verse 2, for those that do that, those who resist will incur judgment. Paul is quite clear.

So we are to submit to the governing authorities. This is part of what it means to worship God.

We're to submit because, the first reason, they are God's servants.

And this brings us to our second main reason that Paul sets out here that we're to be subject to the governing authorities. We're to be subject because the governing authorities commend good and they condemn evil.

They commend good, verse 4, and they condemn evil, the second half of verse 4. If you look down at me at verse 3, Paul has just said that those who resist the authorities resist who God has appointed and that those who resist will incur judgment.

[12:39] Why? Well, because 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 for he is God's servant for your good.

But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword in vain. Paul says to the Romans, Paul says to his readers that they are to be subject to the authorities because they commend people who do right and they condemn people who do wrong.

They commend those who do right, condemn that do wrong. And we know this to be generally true, don't we? We're pretty confident that if somebody does something wrong and they're found out, they will likely face the full weight of the law.

They will be punished. And the authorities in this sense carry out God's judgment here on earth.

We're to submit, says Paul, because the authorities are God's servants for our good and they carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

So we have here in these verses the fact of submission. Paul tells us clearly to submit. We obey, verse 5, to avoid God's wrath and for the sake of our conscience.

[14:13] In other words, because we know that God has placed those authorities there. They're his servants. And Paul then goes on to give some examples of what this looks like in reality in the day-to-day.

So in verse 7, he says, pay to all what is owed to them. And he gives some specifics. Pay taxes to whom taxes are owed.

Pay revenue to whom revenue is owed. Pay respect to whom respect is owed. Pay honour to whom honour is owed. As Christians, we are to be good citizens because this is part of our spiritual worship.

We are to live in submission to those who have authority over us, those who God has placed over you. You are to pay your taxes, even pay respect and honour to whom it is owed.

That is Paul's clear teaching. But this immediately poses a problem for us, doesn't it? No doubt you've had questions like this lurking at the back of your mind since we read this passage.

[15:29] What about those authorities that do what is contrary to God's will? What happens when the authorities ask me to do something that would mean I'll be going against God's word?

What do I do then? Well, Paul doesn't deal with those issues here at all. That is not the thrust of this passage.

we can't fail to have noticed Paul's positive tone here. But do we really blindly obey our authorities? Are you seriously suggesting that if I happen to have been born a century ago in Germany living under the Third Reich, I ought to have gone along with Hitler's final solution?

Is that what you're saying? Well, a few words from John Stott are very helpful here. He says that we are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God.

But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God.

[16:53] So there will come moments when we are to take that stand of refusing to obey the governing authorities in order that we can obey the Lord. However, we can fall under the impression that those in central government spend the majority of their time producing ungodly laws.

And this is simply not the case. Yes, there are times when we are called to take a stand, but for most of us, most of the time, that will not be our experience.

Yes, the authorities do legislate in a way that does not honour the Lord, but we are not to muddy the waters and tar everything that government does with that brush, or use that as an excuse not to obey our authorities.

Much of what the government does is good and promotes the welfare and flourishing of people. Just think for a moment of all that they do that make life good.

Think about the NHS, the police services, our infrastructure, welfare, the rubbish collection, even traffic wardens, the list could go on.

[18:13] Imagine if these weren't in place, imagine if they weren't there. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it? Imagine the chaos, imagine the suffering, if we didn't have our governing authorities.

Think how much worse things would be if we didn't have them, if they weren't there to promote good and restrain evil. We are to be thankful for God's provision of our governing authorities.

We are to pray for them. We are to encourage Christian men and women to seek to work within the governing authorities wherever possible. But why are we just so eager to find loopholes, ways out of Paul's clear command to be subject to the governing authorities?

Even after listing all those things that the governing authorities do that is good, we still want to find ways out. If we're honest with ourselves, the reason we find ourselves wanting to defy authority is not out of concern for the Lord's honour.

One writer puts his finger on it precisely. He says that most of the time, our desire not to submit to authority has nothing to do with obeying God and everything to do with our own selfish desires.

[19:51] We can quite happily refuse to submit to the authorities if it means that there is something in it for me. Just nudge ten miles an hour over the speed limit so that you can get to your fake tanning appointment on time.

Just bend the figure slightly, only slightly, on your tax return. I could go on and on. The difference in these two attitudes to defying authority, either defying authority out of obedience to the Lord on the one hand, or disobeying the governing authorities because there's something in it in the end comes down to who are you really serving?

Who are you really serving? Disobeying the governing authorities out of a desire to obey the Lord is always going to be costly. But we are willing to do so because we are primarily serving the Lord's interests.

If, however, our own interests are primary, then we'll only ever defy our authorities when it is convenient and beneficial to ourselves.

So we need to ask ourselves, when we find ourselves contemplating not submitting to the authorities, is our reason for doing so for the Lord's honour or for our own?

[21:24] So as we draw to a close this lunchtime, for most of us, most of the time, day by day, week by week, we are simply called to submit to our governing authorities.

Why? Because they are God's servants and ministers, and they will be answerable to him in the end. We are called to submit because most of the time and most of the places in the world, the governing authorities commend good and condemn evil.

Our governing authorities are leagues ahead of the first century Roman authorities that Paul was writing to here. How much more, therefore, ought we to be willing to hear Paul's clear command?

Let us carefully consider the sort of attitude that we are passing on to younger generations of Christians. Is it an attitude that conforms to the pattern of this world, that sort of anti-authority attitude?

Are we turning into grumpy old men who have nothing but complaints to make about our authorities? Or are we rather seeking to cultivate the attitude of glad submission that Paul is calling for here?

[22:49] Will we dare resist the authorities who God has appointed? God has appointed the governing authorities over us for our good and to restrain evil.

Let us thank God for them and be willing to submit.