

## Re-set: Living Under Authority

### Romans 13:1-7

I would guess that of all the subjects that Christians disagree about, none is more controversial and heated than politics. So, today, we come to one of the seminal texts about how a follower of Jesus should relate to what the Apostle Paul called “governing authorities”, by which he meant any person who is in the role of governmental authority in society, from emperor or president to governor to mayor to law enforcement officer. Do you feel ready to plunge into what the Bible says about that today?

I am glad that as I was preparing for this message, Chris and I had the privilege of hosting some Christian friends from China – so I spoke with them about how they understood and applied Romans 13:1-7 to their lives. That discussion helped shaped my sermon today. One of the main points they made is that we must remember that this passage was written by a man who had sometimes been imprisoned and beaten by governing authorities and even would eventually be killed by the Roman government. And, it was written to a church that had experienced persecution from governing authorities too. We’re told by the 1<sup>st</sup> C Roman historian Suetonius that a few years before Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome, the Roman Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jewish and Christian people from Rome because of their disputes over one called “Chrestus”.

<http://www.azquotes.com/picture-quotes/quote-as-the-jews-were-making-constant-disturbances-at-the-instigation-of-chrestus-he-claudius-suetonius-106-6-0666.jpg>

The point is that Romans 13 came from people who were on the margins of society wrestling with how they might be a witness to Jesus in a city in which they were often disrespected. My friends from China and I then began to talk about how, when Christians are able to get into places of prominence and power, we often apply this passage in a different way. You may know that Rom 13:1-7 was used in our own country’s history to support the institution of slavery. And, it was used in Nazi Germany when many church leaders said that their people were to submit to the evils and injustices done under Hitler’s rule

With that in mind, let’s plunge into the passage today. Here’s how we’ll approach the matter today: I’ll begin by looking at a profound message that Jesus gave to his followers about government that I think is the basis for Romans 13:1-7. Then, we’ll look at how the Apostle Paul applied Jesus’ message to church people in his day. Perhaps, we’ll be able to gain some guidance about how to re-set political discussions here at Lake.

**The Jesus Message** *Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s* (Mt. 22:17).

In Jesus’ day, the Jewish people were deeply divided politically about the Roman government that controlled them. One day, people from both sides of that political divide came together to try to trap Jesus. Here’s what happened: Just after Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem, members of both groups came to Jesus, began their discussion by flattering him, and then tried to trick him by asking, “Rabbi, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not (Mt 22:17)?”

It was a treacherous question. If Jesus said no, he would be branded as a traitor to Rome. If he said yes, he would be viewed as anti-Israel with his ministry being discredited among most Jewish people. But, Jesus saw through it all and said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Do this: Show me a coin.”

[http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/imp/julius\\_caesar/RSC\\_0034-o.jpg](http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/imp/julius_caesar/RSC_0034-o.jpg) He held it up for all to see. “Whose image is on this coin?” “Caesar’s!” they replied. Then, he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Give to God what is God’s (Mt 22:20-21).”

With this one statement, Jesus established the biblical parameters for understanding the relationship between any kind of authority in this world and God’s full authority over our lives. His words teach us that there is a legitimate domain for governing authorities. “The coin bears the image of your governing leader so pay your taxes,” Jesus says. But, bubbling underneath his words is that everything – yes, everything -- belongs to God. And, Jesus clearly was saying that we who are human bear the image of God. He’s saying that there are other authorities in this world that we must respect – but ultimately, we, and everything in all creation, belong to God.

Jesus’ statement is, in my estimation, the most important political statement in the Bible. And, I view this episode that happened near the end of Jesus’ life as foundational for our Bible passage today.

**Romans 13:1-7 – From Jesus to Paul** *Give to everyone what you owe them* (13:7a).

25-30 years after Jesus spoke his remarkable words, the Apostle Paul took Jesus’ teaching and applied it to the Christians and their political situation in Rome. In fact, you can see that Paul’s conclusion of the matter in

**v. 7** is almost exactly what Jesus had said in Jerusalem. I'm quite sure the political situation in Rome was very volatile. So, I'm also quite sure the Apostle Paul wanted to be sure to give a definitive word on how those who have surrendered to Jesus as their Lord and King should relate to the kingdoms of this world.

Let me, therefore, boil down what he said into a few simple guidelines for us:

1. **Christians are people who have submitted their lives fully to God.** *In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices... Be transformed by the renewal of your minds... (12:1-2). Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities... (13:1).*

Undergirding the whole of Romans 12-13 is the fact that we have surrendered our lives by faith to the God who has shown us mercy. When we do, we find God brings us into his eternal family and he tells us 1) to serve one another (12:3-8) and 2) to love one another without hypocrisy (12:9-13). Not only that, we are 3) to love the people of the world in the same ways that God loves (12:14-21).

Today, in 13:1-7, we see that when we have surrendered our lives to God, we are to respond to the governing authorities in our world by "submitting" to them. And, the main reason for us to do so is found in 13:1: "*There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.*" So, the point is that the Lord to whom we have surrendered our entire lives is also sovereign over everything else in the world, including governing authorities. Indeed, he's established them.

This is the fundamental perspective that we bring into this matter of how we respond to those in authority in our world, i.e., we have surrendered our entire lives, bodies and minds, to the God who has shown mercy to us through Jesus. That God is also the king over all kings, the Lord over all other authorities. When that is true of us, it changes the way we respond to the authorities God has established. How?

2. **Christians in any nation are committed to being supportive and law-abiding citizens.** *Do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good (13:3-4).*

The way I read this is that the first inclination of a child of God is that we want to follow the lead of our leaders and obey the laws of our country because our God has established them. That will be what I call "our muscle-response" to political issues in whatever country God has placed us. Paul puts it quite strongly telling us what we ought to do in response to governing authorities. We **ought** to submit to the government because God established it and has told us to.

So, Christians don't submit to laws simply because we might agree with them or because we think the leader is doing a good job -- but because we **ought** to. Our submission to civil authority is a reflection of our submission to God's authority. And again, remember that Paul was saying this in a situation in which there was not a good government and certainly not one that was favorable to Christians. Paul was not naive when he wrote this. And yet, he says all governments are to be respected -- even bad ones -- because God has established them to bring about his purposes. As in Rom 8:28, God is working all things for good, and 13:4 says that this includes governments.

Even though Paul's words are few, he does tell us about two of **God's purposes for government**:

**#1: To Promote Good** – "*Do what is right and you will be commended (13:3).*"

Just as a good leader in business, education, family, etc. should reward those who do good, so the wise and good governing leader will also promote goodness in the society by rewarding those who do what is good.

**#2: To Punish Evil** – *Rulers are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the evildoer (13:4).*

From ch.1 on, Paul has said that God is holy and just and that, therefore, he will pour his wrath out against evil in the world that he loves. As we all know, if evil is not punished, there can be no justice. However, as Pastor Jeff pointed out last week, **Rom 12:17-19, individual human beings are not to repay evil with evil. Nor are we to be the ones who take revenge on evil that is done.** But then, how will God punish evil? One way is that he establishes governments in this world and gives them the responsibility to be his agents of justice.

We all know that human governments do this imperfectly. Still, while writing to people living under a very bad government, the Apostle Paul is implying that even a bad government is better than anarchy. Read the

book of Judges, a book that describes a world in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes, and you will see what a society that has no respect for its government, its law enforcement agencies, and its justice system looks like. It looks like what hell will be like. As we have been seeing in many of our Central American nations, when we undermine the governing authorities, we do so at our own peril.

Again, the first inclination we should have as followers of Jesus is that we will seek to be supportive and law-abiding citizens. This is an important part of our witness to Jesus in our world.

3. **For Christians, submitting to governmental authority is not the same as blind obedience.** *Give to God what is God's* (Jesus, Mt. 22:21); *Give to everyone what you owe them* (Paul, Rom 13:7).

I come, at last, to the question that I imagine many of you are wondering about, i.e., **Does this mean that we should never take a stand against our government or organize opposition to its policies?** In my estimation, what the Bible says in Rom 13:1-7 is not a complete prohibition of opposition to government -- even, at times, of vigorous and forceful opposition. Many have said it is. But, I don't think so. Let me tell you why.

**This general call to a life of submission to God-established governmental authorities is not the same as a command to obey all its edicts.** The first commandment is that there is nothing to be placed on an equal plane with God. That includes governments. Every government in this fallen world will ask of us things that we cannot give. It will ask us to do things we cannot do.. So, our general rule of life will be to give what we can and to be supportive citizens. But, the King above all other kings, the President who is over all presidents, is our Heavenly Father. Our first allegiance is always to him. There will be times when, to obey God, we will have to disobey the governing authorities.

You surely know that the Bible gives us examples of those kinds of times:

- When King Nebuchadnezzar decreed that all subjects must worship his image, Shadrach, Meschak Abednego refused to obey (Dan 3).
- When King Darius decreed that nobody should pray to any god or man except himself, Daniel refused to obey (Dan 6).
- When the Sanhedrin banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the Apostles refused to obey and said, "Which is right in God's eyes: to obey you or him (Acts 4:20)?" They obeyed God.

In each of those cases, the purpose was, as Chuck Colson wrote, "To demonstrate their submissiveness to God, not their defiance of government." In my own life, I've put together **several personal guidelines** to consider when I'm sensing that I cannot support the governing authorities.

- a. **Am I being asked to violate a direct command from God's Word?** Revolution of any kind against any government will always be a very serious matter for a Christian. We must be very sure of what God's Word asks of us if we undermine something that God has established.
- b. **Am I being asked to do something immoral or unethical?** Does it, as Rom 13:5 says, go against conscience?
- c. **Is God asking me to be a voice for the voiceless?** This is a question the New Testament people could ask only rarely. They were themselves, for the most part, the voiceless. But, most of us have some influence. We dare not run from the commands of Proverbs 31:8-10 -- *Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.*

We applaud when we read of the Hebrew Midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh's command to kill all newborn Jewish boys in Ex 1. We rejoice when we read of how our brothers and sisters in Christ disobeyed the laws in our own nation and stood against slavery by creating an underground railway to help slaves get to freedom. We preach about the courage of Pastors like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller defied the edicts of Nazi Germany and Adolph Hitler in support of the voiceless Jewish people.

We surely have similar issues in our own day -- like the support of unborn children, of children sold into trafficking in our own country and all around the world and, in my own estimation, of those who were brought as children to our country without documentation and now find themselves in great distress and uncertainty. We pray for our leaders when they face establishing laws and policy about such things. But, we may need to give voice to those who are voiceless as God's Word commands us.

But the kinds of actions we read about in the Bible and in church history of people taking a stand against government must be prayerfully and carefully considered. And, in my view, we revolt only when there is an obvious and gross flouting of God's laws – for we belong whole to him. We bear his image.

I appreciate how the Apostle Paul ends this passage. It's in v. 7: "*Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*"

Indeed, the twofold call of Scripture in this matter can be summed up this way: Pray for all people, including your leaders. Honor all people, including your leaders.

To conclude, let's look at how two Christians lived this out. First, the Apostle Peter spoke of honoring leaders as he wrote on the eve of the fiery persecution that Roman Emperor Nero brought down on Christians: *Submit for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme human 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 people... Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor* (1 Pet 2:13-17).

Finally, in the midst of a later persecution, Tertullian taught us how to pray: *We offer prayer for the safety of our leaders to the living God, whose favor, beyond all other things, we pray they will desire. We offer prayer without ceasing for all our emperors. We pray for prolonged life; for their safety, for protection for their families, for brave armies, a trustworthy senate, a virtuous people, and the world at rest.* (Tertullian, A.D. 160-240).