

What Good is the Government?

Romans 13:1-7

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I was so mad I could just spit. We lived in a townhouse with our first dog Roody. We had a very tiny back yard. So we needed to get Roody out and walk him. There was a park across the road. But no dogs were allowed in the park. The only dog allowed area was down under the power lines – a good ten minute walk away. Well, I didn't want to always take Roody down to the "dogs allowed" area. Besides there was an apartment building with a really nice lawn and trees just across our street. I could just take Roody there and save a lot of time.

There was just one problem. A sign on the edge of the property said "no trespassing; residents only." But I was not going to cause any trouble. And I would certainly pick up after my dog if he made a mess. Well, the first time things went well. I walked Roody around the apartment's property and through its trees. I was back home in a matter of minutes and had done my duty. I did the same thing the next day and the next. I walked him for a good two weeks on this apartment property.

Until one day. I was walking my usual route from the street onto the property and towards the back of it when a door flew open. A man glared at me. I think he was the resident manager. He angrily shouted "Do you live in this apartment?" I sensed that the answer I gave next would have a great impact on the direction of our conversation. I could lie and claim yes but then I'd have to come up with a fake apartment number. So I simply responded "no but I live just across the street." "Didn't you read the sign," he shouted. "No trespassing." "But I'm just walking my dog and I clean up if there's any problem." "If you don't get off this property now, I'm calling the police and I will call the police if I ever see you on here again."

I didn't say another word but turned and left. Yet I was steaming. How dare he talk to me like that? You'd think that I threatened his family or something. I thought about going on their lawn late at night and not cleaning up after my dog just to get him. I couldn't believe he had the gall to threaten me just because of some stupid sign.

I was probably irritated for a couple of days while I walked my dog all the way down to the "dog allowed" area. And then I began to think a little more clearly as the blood pressure lowered. There was a sign declaring that area as private property. The sign did say "no trespassing." If I owned a lot, I'm not sure I would want someone else walking their dog on it even if they did clean up after it. But I was sure angry at the way he exercised his authority over me.

How do you respond to authority? When you see a police car, do you immediately have to adjust your driving? Do you hide something in your car or hope the police car leaves as soon as possible?

Or what's your reaction to government. When you think of Prime Minister Harper and the Canadian government, what are your thoughts? What do you think about the provincial government especially with all that was revealed this past week?

Our attitude towards government and authority can be influenced by many factors. You may have had a negative experience with some authority figure in your past. Maybe it was a parent, or a teacher or a boss. That experience continues to affect your view towards authority. Or maybe you were personally affected by a government decision. That affect, whether positive or negative might continue to influence your attitude towards the government today.

What about your friends? What do they think of authority over them? When I was a young adult, I remember walking in downtown Calgary with a friend one time. There were a bunch of people hanging around a corner store by a little fence. A police cruiser suddenly appeared in the parking lot behind where these people sat or stood. As soon as it approached, they all scattered. My friend said "did you see how everyone ran when the pig showed up?"

Now for those of you who are not from Canada, the term "pig" for a police officer is a derogatory term – a way of name calling and insulting the police. I remember thinking for a moment and then asking him "Why do you call the police pigs?" He stopped and thought about it. Then he said something like "I don't know. I guess that's what people around me call them so I just adopted the term." People around us can influence our view towards authority.

You might have friends or family who generally disrespect any authority or had a bad experience with one police officer in their lives. So they paint everyone else with the same brush. Or you have friends or family who has had great relationships with the police or some government official. That can influence how we view the government.

So we have these factors that can influence our attitudes. But we still have our own decisions to make. What will be our attitude toward the government and its representatives? **How are Christians supposed to relate to the government?**

This question arises in the next paragraph of the letter to the Romans. About 4 years ago, we spend several months studying the book of Romans and got into chapter 12. All of the teaching from Romans 12 forward is about our response to God's Gospel and the great mercy He has shown us in our salvation. But we only got to Romans 12:1-2.

Then a year later, I intended to finish the book but only got from Romans 12:3-13. So we are taking another run at Romans with our remaining messages this summer. Last week, Justin led you through Romans 12:14-21 on dealing with those who persecute you. You might think this is pretty far removed from your daily life. But our attitude and response to government can reveal the state of our heart with respect to God.

Today's passage concerns the Christian's response to government. Perhaps today, you will open your heart to the Lord's Word and allow to transform your mind in this area.

Romans 13:1-7 ESV

[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. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] 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, [4] 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. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] 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, honor to whom honor is owed.

Now why does Paul even talk about this? Paul, the author of Romans, stated way back in Romans 12:2 – “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern the will of God; His good, pleasing and perfect will.” As Christians we must certainly guard against conforming to the world and its ways apart from God. But should we refuse to conform to everything that exists in this world including governments? That appears to be the conclusion that some Christians in Rome were leaning towards.

So these first verses of Romans 13 guard against those who might draw the wrong conclusions from his concern that Christians avoid conformity to this age. Paul says we're not to conform with the world – so we would won't conform to the government. Doug Moo writes “To the degree that this age is dominated by Satan and sin, Christians must resolutely refuse to adopt its values. But the world in which Christians continue to live out their bodily existence has not been wholly abandoned by God. He has established in this world certain institutions, such as marriage and government. So we have to figure out how to relate to the government.

Paul begins with the command in the first half of verse 1. **The command - “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”** There it is. Christian, be subject to or submit to those in government over us. Now we might chafe or resist such a command for our own reasons. But consider the people who first received it. Jewish and Gentile

Christians made up the early Roman church. The term Gentile basically means anyone who is not a Jew. The Jewish Christians in Rome had been put through quite a lot by the Roman government. We think this letter to the Romans was written sometime around A.D. 57. In the year 49, the Roman Emperor expelled all Jews from the imperial capital. Riots had broken out when Christians proclaimed the Gospel in local synagogues or Jewish houses of worship. The Romans didn't see much difference between Christians and Jews. They assumed they were all Jews having an internal spat.

So Emperor Claudius banned anyone with Jewish blood from the capital city. This meant great hardship for them. They had to leave their homes, jobs, businesses and start a new life elsewhere. Three years later, Claudius died. The new emperor lifted the ban on Jewish habitation in Rome. So many came back and began to reestablish their lives and work in the capital. Some of these were or became Christians and joined the Roman church. Yet many carried much resentment towards the government for causing such hardship in their lives. So Paul states the command then gives reasons why Christians must obey it.

Why submit to the government?

The first reason he gives why these readers and we must submit **1- God appointed the governing authorities. (verses 1-2)** God is the highest authority in the universe. But He delegates authority on earth to governing officials. In fact, "there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God." So God appoints government over the people. Part of His rule over the earth today includes using human governments. God places a stamp of validity on human government. This was not just Paul's idea. You may have heard the phrase "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesars." That didn't come from a Greek philosopher.

Jesus Himself said this in Mark 12:17 for example. Jesus' opponents always tried to trip Him up so He would be less popular or influential with the people. So they came up with the question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" They thought they had Jesus. If he said yes, the people would turn on him because they hated paying taxes to an occupying power. If he said no, they had grounds to get him in trouble with Rome. But instead he asked for a Roman coin. He asked "*whose likeness and inscription is this?*" They said to him, "*Caesar's.*" **17** Jesus said to them, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*" And they marveled at him.

So Jesus affirmed the legitimacy of government. Paul seems to be picking up on Jesus' statement. Render to Caesar what is Caesars. Be subject to the governing authorities which God has appointed. So if we resist the

government, we resist God's appointments. If we resist government, we will face judgment. Not everything about government is bad.

I remember one summer going to Camp Caroline as a camper. I must have been 9 or 10 years old. I was pretty nervous about going to camp. But I trusted that there would be counselors there that would make things okay. But upon arrival, I was informed that we had no counselor that first night. We would have to go it on our own as a cabin. Now at first, this seemed like a great idea. Here was a room full of 10 year old boys without supervision for an entire night. But as the night dragged on and boys kept talking and kept getting up and kept trying to sneak out and kept tormenting each other, it was chaos. It was a great relief for all of us when a counselor arrived the next day and brought some order. Governments can bring some good.

But what about bad government? What about Hitler? What about Stalin? What about the evil Roman emperors? What about those who banned worship of Christ or demanded that Christians renounce Christ? Do we have to submit to them with unquestioning obedience?

Well, we do have examples throughout the Bible when God's people resisted or even disobeyed the government. In Exodus 1, the Egyptian Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill any Hebrew baby that was born a boy. But they disobeyed and let all babies live. In 1st Kings 18, Queen Jezebel had all the prophets of the Lord killed. But a man named Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them in caves and fed them bread and water in defiance of Jezebel. In Esther 4, Queen Esther calls for a fast. She is about to appear before the Persian Emperor unannounced which was an act of disobedience punishable by death. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to a golden image that the Babylonian king had set up. Daniel refused to stop praying to the Lord after the king had made a law that people could only pray to him. The wise men did not return to King Herod to reveal the birthplace of baby Jesus.

So from these examples we can conclude that the submission a Christian owes the state is never absolute. This command does not demand unquestioning obedience. We live with a tension between two competing claims on our lives. If the state commands us to do something that conflicts with God's laws, then we object. We join with the Apostles who said, "we must obey God rather than man," when they were commanded to stop preaching the name of Christ.

But when the government does not violate God's law we are commanded to be subject to the government. In sense we can so quickly jump to the exceptions that we can easily settle into a practice of resisting the government. But God appointed the governing authorities. Resisting them is resisting him. That's one reason why we must be subject to these authorities. Paul goes on to give us another reason why we must submit to governing authorities.

2 -God entrusts governing authorities with maintaining law and order. (verses 3-4)

God not only appoints them. He entrusts them with the responsibility of punishing wrongdoers and rewarding those who do good. Verses 3 and 4 contain some pretty strong words. Rulers are a terror to those who engage in bad conduct. Rulers bear or carry the sword. Rulers are avengers who carry out God's wrath on wrongdoers. God charges government with maintaining law and order.

Now the Romans who governed the first recipients of this letter did a lot of wrong things. But they were interested in law making and in legal process. They imposed law on a barbaric world. They subdued rebel tribes. They shut down pirates and punished thieves. They demanded orderly behavior in the cities and towns. Roman rule was at times erratic, repressive and its officials were frequently corrupt. Yet though unsatisfactory, it was preferable to the anarchy of civil war. The Mediterranean world suffered civil war and lawlessness for many years before Augustus emerged in 31 BC as virtual dictator and tyrant.

This summer we have seen some significant wars raging throughout the world. We see one in Eastern Ukraine. The government of Ukraine is fighting rebels who have declared independence and want to join that part of the country with Russia. The rebels claim broad popular support in the Eastern part of the country. Initially they had it.

But now it appears that their rule is turning into anarchy and tyranny. Last Sunday, in the city of Donetsk, the Ukrainian army advanced in an attempt to retake this rebel stronghold. The rebels are running out of supplies. So to support their operations, they have been confiscating vehicles and food from residents and businesses in Donetsk.

Last Sunday, a major trucking company that delivers to grocery stores said it was suspending its operations in Donetsk after rebel fighters raided its warehouses. The company, Deliveri, said in a statement on its website that the goods stolen Saturday evening were worth about \$840,000. Viktor Okhramovich, who drives a minibus taxi, said the separatists seized his vehicle. "What am I supposed to do? I have nowhere to go to complain," he said. With the Ukrainian army approaching the city, many Donetsk residents have become reluctant to express support for the rebel

fighters. "Donetsk has turned into a dark hole where you can be taken prisoner, robbed, killed or have your home destroyed," said Inna Statsenko. She is a 52-year-old bank employee, who once supported the separatists. "Now I see that nothing good will come of this. It's time to escape this nightmare," she said. Now, an estimated 300,000 people in the city of 1 million have left their homes because of lawlessness & war. ¹No government is perfect. But if they maintain a good semblance of law and order, they give their citizens a gift.

So why submit to the government? God has appointed the governing authorities to govern. God has entrusted governing authorities to maintain law and order.

3- We avoid God's wrath and enjoy clean consciences before God. (5-6) Verse 5 – "Therefore, one must be in subjection to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." We submit to government to avoid wrath. But we can submit for a positive reason – the sake of our consciences. When a government carries out its wrath against a wrongdoer, it's an extension of God's wrath – so if we don't do wrong we avoid the wrath. When we grow in understanding God's will and purposes, our conscience becomes tuned to God's will. God wills His people to be subject to government except when it commands us to go against His law or refrain from proclaiming His Word.

When we recognize God's will, we can turn a simple act of submission to government as act of worship. So driving the speed limit is an act of worship honoring God. Such submission is part of that good, pleasing and perfect will of God discovered by a renewed mind.

To put this passage in its greater context of Romans, I would summarize its teaching like this - **In response to God's mercy, submit to the government.** Remember Romans 12:1 is the turning point of the letter. Romans 1-11 has described God's Gospel and the incredible gift of mercy He's shown us? Romans 12:1 – Therefore, in view of God's mercy, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable which is your spiritual worship. Part of the response to God's mercy is to follow this command regarding government.

What would this look in our lives today?

Verse 7 lays down the principle – **Pay what is owed to government.**

But Paul uses the same word Jesus used where he said "Render to Caesar what is Caesars". So we pay our taxes. How many people here love paying taxes? Though some tax dollars are wasted, some are used for honest purposes to benefit the general public. If you think we have it bad here, visit a country that has no infrastructure. If we didn't pay

¹ <http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/ukraine-s-army-advances-on-rebel-stronghold-of-donetsk-1.1944447#ixzz39S5aEIZW>

taxes, how many of us would voluntarily put up our money to pay for Anthony Henday expansion or road resurfacing or ambulance services or hospitals? Verse 7 also states “pay revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed and honor to those who need honor. I think this applies to government officials.

Pay what is owed; taxes, revenue, respect honor.

Pray for governing officials - 1 Timothy 2:1-2 – “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Though we love to criticize the government, they have a tough job. They need prayer support to make wise decisions.

Consciously object when the government goes against God’s law.

Remind secular governors that whether they know it or not, they are ministers of God and servants of God who hold their authority under God. When they make laws or put forth policies that go against God, we can certainly object. In our culture, we still have that right and need to speak. Jesus objected to the system of money changing in the Gentile court of the temple. Paul objected to the treatment he and Silas received in Philippi when they were flogged without a trial.

Serve in Government

Christians with abilities appropriate to tasks should consider public service in democratic societies as service for God in the good government of this world.

But as with every message and every command from Scripture, this is not something we can do in our own strength. Our natural selves will rebel against anyone in authority over us. Mine rose up within me when that resident manager confronted me on the apartment property. We want to be the authority – we want to do things our way. We naturally want to resist and be free of any sort of restraint or rule. But the Gospel reveals to us that apart from Christ, we are actually enslaved to our sin. We cannot help sinning. It is our natural response. We may do good moral actions or deeds. But our nature is ultimately stained by sin. We can do nothing to earn reconciliation with God and pay for our own sin.

Christ’s death enables us to live out this command with the joy, guidance and discernment we need. Christ died to take the punishment that we deserved for our sin upon Himself. He offered Himself as a sacrifice of atonement bearing

God's holy and just wrath to the end. So that anyone who receives Christ and submits to Him as Lord and trusts Him for forgiveness will be saved from God's wrath. And we receive the Holy Spirit. We begin to grasp how much mercy we have been shown by God.

As we grasp God's mercies in response to all of them, we present ourselves and all we are before Christ.

Live in a way that will bring glory to Him. But we can't just do this in your own strength. We need continually to depend and rely on Him and His Spirit. We need to let His Word soak into our lives. We need to ask for the Spirit's power to obey this command – to submit to the government. We need to ask for the Spirit's wisdom for when to consciously object to what the government is doing or saying.

Many around us spend most of their lives trying to resist the government or get around its laws or find some loophole. We need the Spirit's power to cultivate an attitude that shows honor and respect to those given this responsibility. By God's grace we can even offer up our subjection to the government as an act of worship. That is only possible because of the death and sacrifice of Christ so that we might be shown mercy and transformed.

I asked you at the beginning of our time today,

- How do you respond to authority?
- How do you respond to the government?
- What has God been speaking to you about during our time together?
- Will you respond to Him now as we prepare to meet at the Lord's Table?