

Who's Really in Charge?

Romans 13:1-7

Message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 4/30/17

Introduction

Growing up, I was taught by my parents to respect my elders and those in positions of authority. I imagine most of you could say the same.

Yet, our society in general seems to be conveying a completely different message today. The value of respect has been lost.

Television and movies portray parents and adult figures as incompetent, with children and youth actually running the show. May seem humorous, but the result has been that a growing segment of society (all races) does not respect the police, or any authority for that matter.

Fortunately there are still many exceptions, where value is still placed on politeness, but disrespect for authority has greatly afflicted our country as a whole.

Too many in our current generation have been so molded by society that they think they alone know best, and everybody else is a fool.

A perfect example is how people treat the president. The man is the leader of our country, yet people make terrible, disrespectful remarks about him constantly.

Regardless if you completely disagree with his agenda, he has been elected and deserves respect. The people of America put him in this position, even if you personally did not vote for him.

Political protests are nothing new.¹ I recall civil rights protests, and protests against Vietnam War – flower power,

¹ Approximately 250,000 people participated in the 1963 civil rights march in DC, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I have a Dream" speech. The slogan, "Make Love, Not War" became a prominent anti-war phrase in the 1960's that was created by those against America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

"*make love not war,*" but never seen such vitriolic, hateful protests as the ones we've seen in the U.S. in the past six months.

Protests escalated into violence across the United States as thousands rallied against Donald Trump's inauguration, burning limousines in Washington D.C., smashing windows in San Francisco, burning the U.S. flag in Portland, clogging the streets of Los Angeles. Police were forced to use flash-bang grenades and tear gas to disperse protesters

What should our reaction, our involvement be as Christians?

The passage we are going to look at today is particularly appropriate in our current cultural climate where disrespect for authority has become the "new normal."

Romans 13:1 *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

Context: In his missionary travels across Europe and Asia Minor Paul faced a recurring problem among new converts, the temptation to use their new found freedom as a rationale to say they were no longer bound by established social practices. Wasn't Paul himself preaching **Romans 12:2 "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world?"** The dawn of

Student groups like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and many others, followed in what the hippies were doing, and helped set up protests with them, but often got out of control and violent. The Kent State Shootings occurred on May 4, 1970 by student protesters. The massacres started because those students were outraged by President Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia.

On September 19, 1981 about 260,000 people participated in the Solidarity Day march in Washington, DC in response to President Ronald Reagan's decision to fire 12,000 air traffic controllers who went on strike and demanded wage increases and safer working conditions.

Around a million protestors filled Central Park in New York on June 12, 1982 to protest nuclear weapons. As a protest to George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq, between 10 and 15 million people marched in 600 cities across the world in 2003.

Christianity had brought a new age, when everything in the world was under judgment! Things of this world should be avoided by truly “spiritual” Christians. Certainly included in “the world” were such institutions as marriage², sex³ and the government.⁴

The apostles had to combat this type of extremism, pointing out that God in fact appointed such institutions for the good of people. Those who taught that their newfound Christian faith required them to think just because such things were accepted as the norm by society in general they were evil and didn’t need to be adhered to, were wrong.

In today’s passage we’ll see that Paul gives **two reasons** why believers need to submit to governmental authorities. (1) God has appointed them.

The word translated **authority** (*exousia*) refers always to power in legal, political, social or moral arenas. Specifically **governing authorities** refers to any person who represents the power of the state: from the local bureaucrat to the regional governor, right up to the emperor, president or prime minister.

Civil authorities at all levels– we often refer to them as “the powers that be” - are agents of God.

Exousia is always linked with a particular position or mandate. It isn’t talking about inherent physical, spiritual or natural powers (another word **dunamis** is used for that type of power.)

So it’s not because the “authority” is stronger than you – that he can wrestle you to the ground, or because he carries a bigger weapon that you need to do what they say.

Presidents, governors, mayors, kings, fathers, landlords, even pastors have certain authority because of their position.⁵

² I Cor. 7; I Timothy 4:3

³ Again I Cor. 7

⁴ I Tim. 2:2; Titus 3:1 “*Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities*”; I Peter 2:13-14

⁵ It can be delegated. When it is illegally usurped leads to despotic rulers, tyrants. E.g. Satan. Jesus acted with authority delegated him by God the Father– destroying the works of Satan, casting out demons, teaching with

Submit is a broader term than “obey.” It means recognizing that we “stand under” government in the hierarchy that God has designed for running the world.

Judaism in general taught submission – a matter of nonresistance or nonviolence (but not always of obedience) unless it involved a conflict with obeying God’s law.

Many Palestinian Jews swore to nonresistance, believing that God had ordained all civil authorities.⁶

Implicit always in the idea of submission is the recognition that God is at the pinnacle of any hierarchy.

All those in authority are actually tools in his hand. E.g. umbrella and protection it gives.

Affairs in Rome during the period Paul was writing made an exhortation for them to obey the government especially apropos.

Most of us reading this text do so within the context of western democracies. We are accustomed to governments elected by the people, following certain broad, humanitarian guidelines in their laws and procedures, accountable to and ultimately answerable to the people.

All that is foreign to Paul’s context. Christians who live under autocratic and even repressive regimes (such as those visited by our missionary Johnny Li) better appreciate what Paul is teaching than we can.

Nero was emperor at the time. Had not yet begun persecution of Christians, but within a few years many of those who were reading this letter would face cruel deaths at his hand.

Just over ten years later Jerusalem would revolt against Rome and be destroyed.

What Paul says here about governing authorities is consistent with typical Old Testament and Jewish teaching. As ruler of the universe, God controls all the affairs of human

authority like no one else alive, healing the sick, forgiving sins. When he rose from the dead he was **given all authority, all power on heaven and earth**. Jesus authorized his disciples to go as his representatives. When we go forth in his power there is no earthly power that trumps that authority we have as sons and daughters and ambassadors of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

⁶ Cf. Daniel 4:32, Isaiah 45:1, Jeremiah 25:1-9a

history – including in particular the rise and fall of political leaders.

We don't need to be worried that secular nations may thwart God's will. Even the most powerful men and women of earth are not inherently powerful. They have no authority of their own. Any authority human world-rulers have is derived from above. (Cf. Jesus' statement to Pilate regarding the authority he had only being from above). It is delegated by God, the Lord of history. His rule is eternal. He installs and removes kings and can take their dominion away from them.

As Isaiah reminds us in

Isaiah 40:23,24 *He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. ²⁴No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.*

A prominent biblical historical example is found in in the book of Daniel.

Daniel 2:20, 21 Daniel is called in to interpret the King's dream about statue with head of gold, chest of silver, belly of bronze, legs of iron, feet part iron and part baked clay.

He prefaces with: ***"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. ²¹He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them."***

Two chapters later in **Daniel 4** we find the most powerful man alive at the time, King Nebuchadnezzar, walking on the roof of his royal palace in Babylon boasting of what he had accomplished ***"by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty."***

The fatal flaw in his arrogance was that he thought he was superior to Jehovah because he had been able to conquer Jerusalem, raze the temple, and carry off to Babylon all the gold and silver objects that had been used by the Jewish priests in their worship ceremonies.

His boasting is interrupted by a voice from heaven:

Daniel 4:31,32 ***"This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you."*** Verse 32 Is told he would be consigned to live like a wild

animal for seven years, eating grass like cattle, ***until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.***

Seven years later he raises his eyes towards heaven, his sanity is restored, and he writes:

Daniel 4:34,35 ***Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.***

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

I said Paul gives **two reasons** why believers need to submit to governmental authorities. Not only (1) has God has appointed them, (2) the authorities, with God's blessing, will punish people who do not obey them.

Romans 13:2 ***Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.***

Romans 13:3 ***For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.***

Romans 13:4 ***For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.***

Civil authorities may not consciously be aware of it, but they are serving God's purposes in the world. They are God's servants, restraining and punishing evil and promoting and rewarding good.

As such, they have the right, under God, to punish wrongdoers. Since the state has a God given responsibility to punish evil doers, if believers want to be free from fear of the authorities, they should do good.

Romans 13:5 *Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.*

Paul repeats the demand to submit to authorities, and then briefly mentions the two reasons again, in reverse order.

“Because of possible punishment” alludes to **verses 3 and 4**; *“because of conscience”* sums up the opening reason lined out in **verses 1 and 2**.

Normally we use “conscience” to refer to that faculty inside us that alerts us to the rightness or wrongness of what we’re doing. But it can also be used more broadly, referring to our **consciousness of God** and of his will for us. Because we understand, because we are conscious that God has appointed the civil authorities, we must submit to them. We know it’s the right thing to do.

Sums it up on a practical note. How does this play out in real everyday life? Pay your taxes!

Romans 13:6 *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing.*

Remember Jesus’ famous saying when the religious leaders tried to trap him. Recorded in all three gospels: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.*⁷

Romans 13:7 *Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

God asks for more than a grudging, outward recognition of the government’s authority. We are also to accord them respect and honor.

The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that there was a growing discontent with the power of Nero’s government at the time period Paul was writing this letter. In particular there was considerable resistance in the middle 50s to paying indirect taxes, culminating in tax protests A.D. 58.

Some of the Christians in Rome were Jewish, and some likely sympathized with the increasingly popular revolutionary program of the Zealots, who were seeking to rescue Israel from Roman oppression by violence.

These forces of unrest at work in the broader society (coupled with an imbalance of the Christian “world-renouncing” theology by some) had evidently led the Roman Christians to question their need to obey the government.

In response Paul isn’t giving a careful, balanced teaching about the state, but deliberately focusing on warning about being involved in any protests against the government.

Believers in every era have quailed before the prospect of obeying orders from what appear to be evil, even demonic rulers. Hitler is a classic example.

And in some cases Scripture seems to present disobedience of secular rulers as a virtue. For example Peter and John respond to the Sanhedrin’s command not to preach about Jesus with these words: **Acts 4:19-20** *“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*

In **Revelation** resistance to the beast’s demands for worship is a mark of commitment to the Lord.

While not always explicit, Paul assumes that a person’s ultimate submission must be to God, and that no human being can ever stand as the ultimate authority for a believer.

Paul doesn’t answer a lot of our questions. For example, when is a government a legitimate government, and when isn’t it so? What if there are rival claimants to the throne? Which one should obey?

When is it right to rebel against an unjust or tyrannical government, or isn’t it ever permitted?

What about our own American War of Independence? If we had been living then, what side would we have taken – that of the colonists or that of England?

Or what about limits? Paul says we are to obey the governing authorities, but does this mean we are to obey

⁷ Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25

everything they command? What about unjust acts commanded by an evil government? Killing civilians?

Conclusion and Invitation

While very practical in its application, this is not a “feel good” passage. In fact, it may be downright unpalatable to some.

Let me suggest that the reason we are uncomfortable with it, is because of an underlying, deeper problem than obeying the civil government.

And that is the ingrained propensity each of us has for rebellion against all authority! We struggle with letting God “be the boss.” Remember playing “tug of war?” Who’s the boss? Who’s in control?

We want to be accountable to no one, the “masters of our own fate,” deciding what is right and wrong.

First protest against authority was Satan (describe). Not being content to be a lone rebel, he enticed 1/3 of the angels to rebel with him. (As a result they were cast out of heaven, forming the rebel spiritual forces we refer to as evil spirits or demons).

Not content with that rebellion, Satan instigated revolt against God among those special creatures who had been created in God’s image.

He deceived Adam and Eve, but they walked into the trap with their eyes wide open.

God’s provision: Jesus Christ.

Our response: acknowledgement of him as rightful ruler of our lives, seeking his forgiveness, being cleansed of our sins, and following him as Lord of our life.

Romans 10:9,10 *If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*