

**Sermon for Sunday, November 28, 2010**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Who's in Charge?**  
**Romans 13:1-7; Rev. 13; 1 Peter 2:11-17**

In the fall of 1561 a conversation took place in Scotland between Queen Mary and the Calvinistic Protestant preacher John Knox. Mary was a Catholic. She believed that sovereigns, such as herself, had power to determine the religious convictions of their subjects. Her position, Erastianism, represents one of four possible relations between the authority of church and state:

- Erastianism: state authority, especially the monarch, controls the church.
- Theocracy: the church establishes civil law and so controls the state.
- Constantinianism: the state favors the church and, to retain its favor, the church accommodates or favors the state in return.
- Kuyperianism: the church and state recognize that each has God-given authority in its sphere. Both are seeking constructive collaboration without domination.

Knox was no Erastian. For his uncompromising preaching he had been sentenced to serve as a galley slave for nineteen months. Contrary to expectations he survived, and after his release, he studied in Geneva under John Calvin from 1553 to 1559. He returned home and helped draft the Scottish Confession that says Jesus Christ "is the only Head of His Kirk".

In the interview Mary accused Knox of wrongly teaching the people to receive another religion that their princes disallow. "And how can that doctrine be of God, seeing that God commands subjects to obey their princes," she asked, referring to Romans 13:1.

Knox replied, "Madam, as right religion took neither [its] origin nor authority from worldly princes, but from the Eternal God alone, so are not subjects bound to frame their religion according to the appetites of the princes." Besides, God commands queens nurture his people.

"Yes, but you are not the church that I will nourish," she retorted. Knox replied, "Your will, Madam, is no reason." Thus, the issue of church and state authority was framed in Scotland in the sixteenth century.

Questions of authority in itself and as they compete with one another remain, more urgent than ever. Because of our cultural position, we need to hear Romans 13 more than ever. For we who reside in the U.S.A., a representative democracy, our electoral system offers regular opportunities to choose our leaders, to call one government and expel another. Representative democracy is surely one of the great social creations of mankind, but partisan politics has a negative effect. Since people pay more attention to bad news than to good news, many politicians get elected by attacking the other side. A spirit of criticism develops. Since the late 1960s, every president has left office reviled by large, even overwhelming, portions of the electorate. And because we constantly criticize our governors, it is hard to hear Paul: "**Everyone must submit** to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (Rom 13:1). Because every authority is "established by God," all deserve honor and respect (13:1, 7).

God established every authority of this world – including the impersonal laws of physics, chemistry, biology and the moral law. He also ordained human authorities. From the beginning, he ordains parents. From the top down, he establishes governors, kings, prime ministers, and presidents.

This law teaches us how to live in this world. It tells how to make love concrete (12:9, 13:8). It teaches us to avoid a mistake. Yes, this age is passing away and we should not conform ourselves to it, but we do still live in this world. We have to live in nations, in institutions and Paul tells us how.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Submission to the authorities God established – especially the state

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities." The word "authorities" is like ours; it ordinarily implies legitimacy. "Submit" is a pure command, one so important that Paul states his reason three times in a row:

Submit, he says "for there is no authority, except from God" (13:1b English Standard Version(ESV)). He restates positively: "Those that exist have been instituted [appointed, pf] by God" (13:1c ESV). He draws the conclusion "Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed" – and can expect to be punished for it. Those who rebel "will bring judgment on themselves" (13:2), judgment from the authorities, who punish illegal acts, and from God. Christ is King! He appoints kings beneath him.

This is a vital statement. We are prone to complain and criticize as if we know or rule. But the world is not flat. All opinions are not equal. God's count more than ours. Since God ordained the authorities, they deserve respect that we must render: "Pay all of them their dues... respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" (13:7). This includes governors and magistrates, leaders in business, the family, the church, the school.

We submit to authority for God's sake. He ordains the authorities, so we should submit to the authorities he created. We submit to all authorities: first to the king or emperor, the supreme authority, from whom (theoretically) all authority flows (cf. Matt 8:8-9). After the king we submit to the arrayed local magistrates who govern travel, commerce, schools, and the rest.

Someone will ask: Did God really ordain *all* authorities? What of Hitler, Stalin and Mao? What of South Africa's racist system of apartheid? Worse, as a nation with a Christian heritage, some of its leaders quoted Romans 13 to justify apartheid. They said, "Look, the authorities set up this system, so submit to it." Are they right?

Almost. Submission is the norm and we submit to authority as long as we can. But "if the state commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands" then it is our duty to "disobey the state so we can obey God."<sup>2</sup>

Still, God's purposes stand behind all events – at least he permits them. The prophet Daniel told king Nebuchadnezzar (the proud, of "is this not great Babylon that I have built") "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men" (Dan. 4:17)

In democracies we balk at submission to authority, especially if our candidate didn't win. But we submit "for the Lord's sake" (1 Pet 2:13). At a minimum, we respect the office and pray for the person in authority. Remember, when Paul wrote that many emperors *claimed deity*. So we can submit if the person governing us takes stands we consider mistaken.

Submit is an ugly word for many of us. We think we submit when we've been dominated, even humiliated. But "submit" is not negative in biblical languages. Submit conveys the idea of hierarchical order. Someone in authority can give orders to others to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Moo, 791-2

<sup>2</sup> Stott, 342

But submission is subtler than obedience. To submit is to arrange one's life under the authority or guidance of another. Someone who submits still has freedom to determine how to follow the leader.<sup>3</sup>

It's good for us to submit to authority. I don't say this because I have authority as senior pastor. As you know, I have doubts about the title precisely because it suggests powers that belong to no man. I am under the authority of the session. When I join committee meetings, I say I'm there to inform or suggest, not give orders. Committees are free to disagree with me, and they do. Recently, I gave a short impassioned plea to a certain committee. They listened carefully and decided otherwise. It's good for me to submit to their wisdom. They were united. When I'm in a clear minority I tell myself, "They are probably right." Indeed, any time a group of wise, godly people decide one way and you another, you're probably wrong.

This isn't the way we always think: Recall how the U.S. Constitution begins: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." This statement rests on serious political theory. Historically speaking, this is an accurate statement - the people did establish the government. It's accurate, but not complete. Paul says God himself ordained the ruling authorities. For that reason, we should respect them, submit to them. Nothing could be clearer.

Yet, we must ponder Paul's statement. Does he believe that Herod, Nero, Hitler and xenophobic lunatics of North Korea deserved respect and obedience? The disciple is ordinarily the most loyal citizen and submits to authority. We don't rebel – unless the authorities command something that contradicts God's will. When we must choose between obeying God and man, we obey God. We are ready, if necessary, to be subversive, to obey God rather than man.

Calvin said we should rebel and yet submit to authority by rebelling under the authority of "the lesser magistrate".<sup>4</sup> This essentially was what Bonhoeffer attempted when he joined various German leaders who attempted to kill Hitler.

Several Bible stories present the principle. When Pharaoh ordered Hebrew midwives to kill baby boys, they refused. When Nebuchadnezzar ordered all his subjects to fall down and worship a golden image of him, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused, although they knew it could cost them their life.

A case appears in Acts 5. The popularity of the apostles had led Jerusalem's authorities to believe they had to be stopped. They arrested the apostles and tossed them in jail. God dispatched an angel to open the jail doors and commissioned them, "Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life" (Acts 5:20).

The apostles obeyed at once: "At daybreak they... began to teach." Soon the authorities heard of this and "made them appear before the Sanhedrin [supreme court]." The high priest said, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." The apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!" (5:21-29).

Generally, Christians are the most loyal citizens. We want to obey and serve the government. Enlightenment philosophers said government is a human institution, hence easily overthrown, as in the French Revolution. We don't believe the government's final authority derives from the people or the popular vote. If governments are man-made, then humanity can easily disobey them.

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Goppelt, 1 Peter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp.174-6

<sup>4</sup> (Institutes 4).

God both ordains human governments and stands above them. He judges our kings, judges, and law-makers. If their rules contradict His rule, then we must be prepared to defy them. We answer to God and we obey him first. The apostles did, as they preached the gospel right after they were ordered to stop:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead.... God exalted him to his own right hand... that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him (5:30-32).

So our submission to human authority is never blind. We must disobey evil laws and we may protest foolish ones. I believe we should protest the deficit, which has multiplied without restraint for a decade. Our refusal to pay our bills is intergenerational theft and we should say so.

The freedom of the Christian normally "manifests itself in... submission and honor."<sup>5</sup> But we practice civil disobedience "when the demands of society" threaten to override "the demands of the Lord."<sup>6</sup> The Christian is ready to say "no" to a wicked command, for "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

## **2. The responsibilities of the authorities – to do justice**

"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. For he is God's servant for your good" (Rom.13:3-4, ESV). Anyone who suddenly sees a policeman understands this. If the speed limit is 50 and you are going 47, there is no fear. If it's late at night, if the neighborhood is rough, you are glad. But if you are driving 61, the same sight brings fear.

"If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. He is the servant of God, an avenger of wrath who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (13:4). By "the sword" Paul means the right of government to punish lawbreakers, perhaps including the power of life and death (in war, capital punishment.<sup>7</sup> More, individuals cannot take vengeance (Rom. 12:19) because God does. He does so through the state.

Authorities are not free to pursue their own agendas. They are God's agents, called to preserve justice. It is the state's duty to punish sin and lawlessness and so to preserve social order. Governors must "punish those who do evil and praise those who do good" (1 Pet. 2:14, ESV).

Every ruler should hear this. Governors have substantial opportunity to be God's servants for good. This holds especially to political and military governors, but also to all who promote or enforce justice.

First, Governors bear the sword to protect the land and people from attack by hostile powers. So they can live in peace. This is the military.

Second, just rulers should encourage good conduct and discourage evil. Even the Christian is assisted on the road of faith and salvation if we know good deeds are noticed, rewarded.<sup>8</sup> The government must maintain public order by punishing crime and lawlessness. Pagan governors have a right and obligation to punish misconduct (Rom. 13:3-4). In fact, there is criminal law in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, trans. David Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 278.

<sup>6</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter*, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Stott 344-5; Moo 801-2.

<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, 2:665-6.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 289-92.

Notice that Paul says authorities should single out virtue and "approve" it. Therefore, if we have political, economic, scholastic, or familial authority, we should use it to commend what is good. Coach can say, "good job." Boss can say, "well done." Honors, medals, awards commend what is good. I know we overdo it, but some praise is biblical.

But justice is "God's primary demand on human authorities." They must shun bribes, patronage and inside deals, so are fair, impartial and just to all. They must protect everyone, but especially the needy and the weak (Deut 16:18-20; Ps. 72:1-4; Jer. 22:2-5!). When rulers become fond of the privileges and perks of office, they can betray their calling. Proverbs warns kings not to love wine:

lest they... forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights... Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy (Prov. 31:4-5, 8-9).

Third, it helps most of us, when we consider doing something wrong, to know that we might get caught and punished. This is hardly the noblest motive for doing good, but it is a motive. Auditors and regulators keep some people honest.

Fourth, when the state exercises justice and avenges wrong, it reminds us of God's justice and wrath. It points to the last day and urges us all to prepare for it.

Paul knows reality can be very different. The Bible recounts Pharaoh's genocide, Saul's insanity, Solomon's materialism, Ahab's culpable weakness, Nebuchadnezzar's pride, Herod's murders.

Above all, Jesus suffered judicial murder from Jewish and Roman authorities because his goodness alarmed them. Paul himself endured unjust beatings and imprisonment. Sometimes corrupt states commend wickedness and punish people because they are good. What then? We must be prepared for abuse, even from people who know the Bible and claim faith.

John Perkins, pastor and founder of Voice of Calvary Ministries was part of the civil rights movement. In 1970, a van full of black college students was pulled over and arrested. Perkins went down to the jail to post bail, but when he arrived seven or eight deputy sheriffs and highway patrolmen began to beat him. He wasn't under arrest, he wasn't charged with anything. They hated him for his civil rights leadership. They punched him, kicked him in the head and ribs, cut him and left him for dead. So the authorities, sworn to uphold justice, became the leaders of injustice.

So the Lord gave us Revelation 13, to counter-balance Romans 13. If Romans 13 describes ideal government, Revelation 13 describes government gone amok. The Lord gave John a vision: A terrible beast is emerging from the sea. It has ten horns, signifying great power. It has seven heads, each with a crown, signifying rule and authority. The dragon, Satan, welcomes and summons the terrible beast and gives him power to blaspheme God and to wage war against God's people (Rev. 13:1-7).

This beast represents the power and authority of government in the service of evil. At its worst, godless government seeks to coerce Christians to conform to godless values, to adopt the gods of the age. If a Christian resists, it will exert social pressure first. If that fails, it may use violence to compel obedience.

Perverted government even receives worship (13:4). During the life of the apostles, three Roman emperors claimed to be gods and attempted to force the people to worship them: Gaius/Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. Sadly, emperor worship is part of a long tradition. The Pharaohs and Alexander the Great also claimed to be gods. Communist and totalitarian leaders called themselves "the father" of their nations. They erect thousands of statues to their honor and plaster pictures of themselves on the sides of city buildings. To this day, governments are prone to make promises that only God can keep.

Democracies are less prone to self-deification because anyone can publicly criticize leaders. It is hard to worship a leader who receives blistering criticism by day and is the butt of cartoons and jokes every night. But democracies have promised to keep everyone warm, well-fed and healthy, from cradle to grave.

You and I are tempted to deify and glorify the government. We expect it to exercise God-like powers for us, to provide freedom, prosperity, and peace. We need both Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Rulers are a gift, worthy of our respect, but rulers can also think of themselves as gods and we can fuel their delusions.

But even flawed governors do much good. They defend national borders, build roads, and (usually) promote public order.<sup>10</sup> Even if a governor is corrupt or feckless, we should respect it (Rom. 13:7). The threat of punishment prevents anarchy. An infamous case of anarchy came to Rwanda around 1995-1998. When the Hutu prime minister died in a plane crash, a group of Hutus decided it was a Tutsi plot and planned to exact revenge on the Tutsis. Long simmering resentments, left over from colonial times, burst into genocide because there was no effective government in Rwanda and other nations refused to intervene.

**3. Living well under authority** Again, our passage has clear commands.

First, because the state is God's servant, "one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience" (13:5). We know that, willingly or unwillingly, the state is God's servant. God isn't responsible for all it does but all human authority is derived from God. We should respect that.

Second, we pay taxes, "For the same reason you also pay taxes." Paul says "the authorities are ministers of God" (13:6). In Paul's day people paid a head tax, duties on roads, at ports, probably beyond our rates today. Yet Christians were supposed to pay the state so it could render its services. Today, we should be careful to pay what we owe, to do so with respect, respectfully petitioning for change.

Third, pay everyone their due "revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Who deserves our honor?

Kings and governors: "Honor the king" says Peter 2:17. We honor governors by speaking of them respectfully, praying for them. This holds for teachers, policemen, military leaders and more.

The apostles commanded honor for governors in days when tyrants ruled often. Living in a democracy with great rights and freedoms, we should honor our governors all the more. They even allow us to protest against them. We should ask questions on the great issues: war and defense, the economy and debt, and care for the unborn. (Civil disobedience is even an option – although we must take the consequences.)

These we should honor: Church leaders: "Elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17). Parents: Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12). The aged: "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect to the elderly (Lev. 19:32). God himself: "To him be glory and honor forever" (1 Tim. 6:16).

Again, someone will ask: Did God appoint all authorities? Historically, kings gain power many ways: through inheritance, by conquest, intrigue, and murder. Lesser authorities take their posts by nepotism, by bribery, or by merit. We think of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, the three talented but lunatic leaders of the 20th century. Each killed millions of *his* people in a deranged quest for a pure new order. Each claimed worship or something close to it. God isn't accountable for their sins, but he does ordain that they rule.

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<sup>10</sup> Wright, Ethics, 269-75

## Conclusions

Romans 13:1-7 is law. It tells us how to live. Remember the role of law in God's plan: The law states God's moral standards, his will. The law directs behavior, labels sin, and so reins it in, at least somewhat.

But no one can follow the law. No one exercises authority as he should and no one responds to authority precisely as he should. Therefore the law labels sin and leads us to Christ. He died for our sins – sins of rejecting and misusing authority.

Once we come to Christ, he is our friend in every way, even as we consider the law. The Lord Jesus responds perfectly to authority, by doing all the Father gave him to do. The Lord Jesus also exercises authority perfectly, ruling with justice and grace. He is the king we always sought and we follow his way.