

Sermon Title: No Authority But God
Biblical Text: Romans 13:1
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 13:1

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.

We're starting a new chapter in Paul's letter today. Yet he's flow of thought is uninterrupted. He's been talking about our various relationships within the Christian life. In chapter 12 we learned about four basic relationships. Our relationship with God (vv.1-2), with ourselves (vv.3-8), with each other (vv.9-16), and even with our enemies (vv.17-21). Now in chapter 13 the Apostle Paul develops three more, broader relationships: with the state or government (vv.1-7), with the law (vv.8-10), and with time, especially the return of Christ (vv.11-14). As you can see, the writer moves from the inside out. From our most intimate and central relationship with the Lord to our relationships with our spiritual community ... our country ... and our future.

And so we find ourselves in the middle of this development of healthy Christian behaviors and relationships. Today we'll tackle one of our most complicated and

misunderstood relationships, that is the relationship between the state or government and the Church.

One Bible teacher had a particular problem with this passage. He was so repulsed by its teaching, he not only thought Romans 13:1-7 wasn't written by Paul but also he found it incompatible with Christianity. He went as far as to say that no biblical text has brought more unhappiness or misery than this one (J. C. O'Neill, *NTS*, XI [1964–65], pp. 365–74). He's not alone, of course. Many modern Bible readers find issue with Romans 13, citing its permissiveness toward unjust and corrupt government leaders. Yet, Dr. Esau McCaulley sees in this passage "*the beginning of a Christian theology of policing*" (*Reading While Black*, 28).

It's easy to understand why there's so much disagreement and tension around this text. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul says to us today, "*be subject to the governing authorities*" (v.1a). This is direct violation of our modern psyche. Being subject to anyone or anything is contrary to our cultural value system. That's why in *The Avengers*, when Loki tells a crowd to kneel and that they were made to be ruled, our hearts took courage when an elderly man stood to his feet in defiance (*The Avengers*, 2012). That's why when Miley Cyrus sings, *I can take myself dancing / And I can hold my own hand / Yeah, I can love me better than you can*, we rejoice that a woman is not subjected to Liam Hemsworth or any man (*Flowers*, 2023). That's why when political figures or governing powers demand our blind trust or complete allegiance we bristle at the thought.

In order to understand how to respond to this teaching and our innate sense of autonomy, we must think deeply about what Paul is saying here about government, God, and the Church. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about Christian civility. What does it mean to be a citizen of heaven and yet, in most our cases, a citizen of this country.

Here's how organize our time ...

- The *purpose* of government.
- The *authority* of God.
- The *civility* of the Church.

[Pray]

Movement 1: The Purpose of Government (v.1, Genesis 1:28, 2:16-17,24)

Let's look at this verse together. *Read Romans 13:1 ... 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.* In thinking about the purpose of government we must first consider who instituted or established or invented government. And Paul says God did. God instituted government. So, our next question ... *Why? What for? What's the purpose of government or governing*

authorities? Well, we have to go back to the very beginning to fully appreciate the purpose of government.

God created the world as a world of order. He is the God of order. His world had moral rules, seasons, and ecosystems. And not only did God lay out consequences for violating his designed order but God also gifted this orderly world to people.

The writer of Genesis captures it this way, ***Read Genesis 1:28 ... And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*** So in God's orderly world, people are commissioned to be fruitful. They're called to fill the earth. And God gives them *dominion*. In other words, under the authority of God, human beings are given a level of authority over creation. God's world is orderly and people are called to steward his world orderly. Yet, if they did not steward his creation properly, according to his purposes, then he warned them that chaos and disorder and death would enter the human story (Genesis 2:16-17). And of course, they did.

Sin soon comes and death brings catastrophic disorder (Genesis 3). Instead of living in loving harmony with God, each other, and creation ... our first parents violated the created order and the authority entrusted to them. Ever since we've battled for order and happiness and safety and justice. And as long as we've sought this renewal, we've failed to recapture the goodness and *Shalom* of these first days of humanity.

God's creation is orderly.

Sin disordered creation.

We now live in this space between. A world meant for order, disordered by sin. In this in between God has graciously made three institutions to bring restoration and healing to this fractured world through the power of Christ. *Forgive this massive oversimplification ...*

- The first is the the family (Genesis 2:24). Specifically the family is meant to incarnate a picture of Christ and the Church as well as provide for the basic needs of its members (Ephesians 5:22-33). The family brings order through love.
- The next is the government (Genesis 9). After the flood, God establishes a covenant with "*all flesh that is on the earth*" and Noah and his family are meant to give structure and protection to citizens from injustice, mistreatment, and even from themselves. The government brings order through organizing social structure and systems and protections.
- The third institution is the Church (Acts 2). While the family *loves* and government *organizes*, the Church is called to *bear witness*. As followers of Jesus we speak and live the words of Jesus, desiring to see order establishes

in our interior lives as well as that of our friends and neighbors. The Church brings order by bearing witness to God's truth and beauty.

All this say, along with families and the Church, government is meant to restore order to God's creation. God has ordained government to serve his purposes. And the *purpose* of government is to restore order. And through the years many different views have been offered as to how Christians should engage with the state or in Paul's words "***be subject to the governing authorities***" (v.13).

You're probably most familiar with the metaphor Thomas Jefferson's made popular, "*separation of church and state.*" Jefferson wanted to disestablish the Anglican church in Virginia. And he wrote to a friend wanting to ensure that, what he called, "*a wall of separation*" be placed between religion and government. In this country that idea lives on in what's known as the Establishment Clause. It's part of the first amendment; "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...*" While that might seem to clear things up for us, it still leaves a lot to be desired. Because ultimately the Establishment Clause limits government. It's not an exposition of Romans 13. The Bill of Rights doesn't instruct Christians how to view or participate as Christians in government.

Dr. John Stott saw four models: Erastianism (the state controls the church), theocracy (the church controls the state), Constantinianism (institutions trade favors), and partnership (church and state respect and collaborate with one another) (*Romans*, 339). Paul undoubtedly has this fourth view in mind. After all, God has

instituted government to bring order in the forms of safety, equity, and justice. And Christians should be all about those things. That doesn't mean we'll agree on every idea and policy. But as the writers of a fantastic book, *Compassion & Conviction*, have put it, "***The goal is not to have all Christians share the same exact politics but to have all Christians think Christianly about politics***" (*Compassion & Conviction*, 38). That's what Paul is doing. He's helping us think like Christians with respect to government.

The God-given *purpose* of government is to bring order to God's world. But, I know what you're thinking ... *what do we do when a government is not bringing order? In the same way that families are not always loving and churches are not always speaking and living truth ... government is not always fulfilling it's purpose as an ordained institution. What's our response to disorderly and unrighteous governments and government officials?*

Movement 2: The Authority of God (v.13; 12:19, John 19:9-11, Acts 5:29)

To answer those important questions, let's go back to the creation narrative. When God makes Adam and Eve stewards of his creation, God does not give over ownership. In the same way, when God institutes government he does not give away authority. This is how God acts. He works through people. He works through us. But he is still supreme. And so throughout history we've seen brothers and sisters live in subjection to government, but remain true first, foremost, and forever

to the authority of God. Subjection to the government comes in subjection to the authority of God. In other words, we live in the wake of faithful women and men who submitted to government only up to the point it meant disobedience to God.

Paul is most certainly creating space for civil disobedience. He does that through a theology of authority. He says, ***Read Romans 13:1b ... For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. There is no authority except from God,*** and so if any authority is not reflective of his character we ought to wait, question, disobey, and even work against that authority. You see, in many respects this idea flows out of what Paul said back in 12:19. ***Read Romans 12:19 ... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*** As Christians we can *live peaceably with all* because God has ultimate authority. Sometimes that means we wait. We wait for divine wrath to bring order. We trust, in time God will make everything right. But that's not our only hope. Other times, God's order comes more quickly. Specifically he brings justice through the family, government, and Church. This is why theologians talk about the kingdom of God as already, but not yet. It's called an inaugurated eschatology. Inaugurated, or *progressively*. Eschatology, or *study of end times*. You see, while there is much we are waiting for, his order is surely coming to fruition here and now.

One of those avenues is governing authorities.

That means human authority is always borrowed authority. Whether we exercise power or submit to it, we ought to keep this in mind. Jesus made this clear to Pontus Pilate. Turn to John 19:9. Jesus puts Pilate on blast as he awaits execution. And the Roman magistrate is frustrated because he knows Jesus is innocent, but the people want him to die. Look at John 19:9-11. ***Read John 19:9-11 ... He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."*** Pilate was no longer submissive to God's purposes for government. He was not bringing order, he was authoring chaos and violence and disorder. Jesus of course knew this. But Jesus also knew Pilate wasn't really in charge. He knew all his governmental authority was borrowed from God, the one *from above*.

When the early church leaders were thrown into prison they were beaten and warned to stop preaching the gospel. Instead of protecting them, the governing powers used their authority to dissuade the Church from fulfilling its God-given purpose to bear witness to the gospel. Meet me in Acts 5:29. The Apostle Peter responded (it was always that dude who spoke first), ***Read Acts 5:29 ... "We must obey God rather than men."*** This is what we might call Christian civil disobedience. And it's not simply called for when government prevents the preaching of the gospel.

When wages are withheld or people are mistreated or unable to vote; Christians have always waited, questioned, disobeyed, and even worked against any and every authority which did not reflect the authority of God, from whom all authority is borrowed ...

- Dorothy Day refused to submit to the authorities of California who sought to justify their abusive treatment of migrant farm workers. After she became a Christian she stood on the front lines with Caesar Chavez.
- Fredrick Douglass loved Jesus and was instrumental in assisting and advising President Lincoln in the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which eventually freed enslaved Black people.
- Fannie Lou Hammer grew up in the Baptist church and became a leading voice and advocate in Mississippi during Jim Crow, ensuring that Black people in the South were registered and able to vote.

These are a meager few who represent an ancient heritage of our faith. When government does not use its authority to bring order to God's world ... we wait, we question, we disobey, and we work against that authority. Because all authority is God's. We'll address this tension more next week, but suffice for our time that when a government is not bringing order, we remember that our ultimate authority is not a president, party, or any policy. Rather our *authority* is God.

Movement 3: The Civility of the Church (Matthew 27:40;42-43, Acts 5:29-32)

As we develop this understanding of our spiritual and national citizenry we of course look to the cross. Because after Jesus' verbal fisticuffs with Pilate, he was murdered, he was unjustly executed by the government. Through his life and ministry Jesus questioned, disobeyed, and worked against the disorder of his governing authorities ... be he also waited. He subjected himself to them.

As Jesus hung on the cross, citizens walked by insulting him and mocking him.

They said, *Read Matthew 27:40 ... "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."* And even the governing authorities who put him on the cross said, *Read Matthew 27:42-43 ... "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.' "* What's happening here? Well, they are essentially saying if God is really the supreme authority then you would not be subjecting yourself to earthly authority. *Right? Why would you die if you don't have to?* Well, because Jesus knew the authority of God did not fit within their religious and earthly ways of thinking.

Though his authority is expressed in this world, it is not bound by this world. If you're still in Acts 5, look at how Peter continues. *Read Acts 5:29-32 ... "We must*

obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." Even though we wait, question, disobey, and work against disorderly governing authorities ... that does not mean we will win. At least not in an earthly sense.

The writers of *Compassion & Conviction* explain the civility of the Church deftly. They say, "*When in conflict we should demonstrate that our public witness is more important than winning a political battle*" (*Compassion & Conviction*, 17). Witness is greater than winning ...

Church, in your engagement of government and politics, *do you want to win more than you want to show love?* In your apathy toward engaging this God-ordained institution, *are you more concerned with your comfort and earthly power than seeing God's order restored to all the world?* You see, that's the other side of this consideration. For some of us, we need to remember God is authoritative over government. For others of us, we need to remember God's purposes are often executed through government.

And so ...

- *What if we waited with each other? Not because we necessarily agreed but because we both knew the value of being subject to the government and trusting God's authority? You know in our church some people celebrated the so-called overturn of Roe v. Wade. Other's lamented that. What if we waited on the Lord together? Knowing one day both women and the unborn will be fully seen and cared for.*
- *What if we questioned together? Not because we had the same skepticism but because we know government is not supreme or perfect and ought to be held accountable? I saw on Twitter this week that Justin Giboney, the president of *The And Campaign* said that if you can't find 5-10 things wrong with your political party you're probably indoctrinated.*
- *What if we afforded our political opponents the same opportunities to disobey and work against governing powers as we desire? And we didn't call them extreme or ridiculous simply because it was different than our view.*

This is how we maintain our witness rather than ensure our wins. We are subject to governing authorities but trust only God. That means we may suffer political losses for the sake of spiritual gains.

Jesus suffered a loss for the sake of gain. He submitted to the governing authorities even to the point of death. For those of us who put too much hope in government,

the death of Christ should redirect our faith in God's ultimate *authority*. For those of us who remain disengaged from government, the death of Christ shout reaffirm our understanding of God's *purpose* for government. You see, in a strange and mysterious way, God used even the corruption and disorder of government to bring about his good, pleasing, and perfect will. I think that's what the *civility* of the Church ought to look like. Losing earthly battles for the sake of spiritual gains. We see government as one way God is restoring order in his world. But God is alone is the one who restores all things.