

## Obedience to Those Whom God Has Ordained Romans 13:1-7

We have been going through this difficult but very easy to understand passage of Scripture that is indicating the relationship that the believer has with the government. We have seen that God has instituted various powers that be, which is an incredible statement when you think of some of the governments and dictators that have existed throughout human history. Even for these Christians at Rome who realized the wickedness and evilness of Nero who ruled. God has ordained the powers that be. He has placed these governing authorities for his glory and the good of his people.

And based on that truth taught in verse 1, there was there application of that truth. And that is if you go against the government of the day, you go against God. You sin against him who has ordained these powers that be. It is not only rebellion against government but rebellion against God. And there might be many laws that we do not like, but by carrying them out we are not disobeying God. It might be speed laws. I can travel safely to my destination going thirty kilometres over the posted speed. Time is important. I want to use my time wisely and have more of it. The officer who pulls you over might not care or see your interpretation about why you are speeding. You will incur a penalty. We might not like to wear a seat belt, or have to have a driver's license, but those are laws that we must submit to, whether we like it or not, whether it makes our life easier or more difficult.

And as we look at most of the laws of the land they are there and they really are easy to follow, and as we follow them, we are able to carry out the gospel mandate that God has given us to make and mature disciples. And that has to be our primary concern and also our primary end. Now when harsh laws are passed and they curtail our freedoms or make our life more difficult, we often ask the question "why?" Why are we going through what we are going through? We have to have a reason. We have to know what God is doing. Many have tried to ascertain what God is doing through all of the statutes that have been passed because of the pandemic, and many have thought this might be setting up the return of Jesus. And it might be, but we do not know. And certainly the vast majority of the population of the world has had a worse time and greater affliction and confinement under their governments than we have.

We cannot know what God is doing, but this passage is calling us to trust in him. He has already proven his loyalty and love and wisdom through the cross. He is not obligated to give us a reason of why he has ordained the trials we go through because of government. But we are obligated to obey them as long as they do not command us to go against God or what he has said or commanded. It is amazing to look at Job. Job is afflicted and asks the question "why" sixteen times, but God never answers him. The only answer he gives to Job is "who." He is called to see God and trust in him. In fact, we are not told why Job ultimately suffered. Certainly we have that wager with God and Satan at the beginning of the Book. Satan says if he afflicts Job he will curse God, but that cannot be the main reason because after chapter two Satan does not appear. If that was the main reason we would find him at the end of the book.

There are many mysteries of providence, and the ultimate governance of God and why he establishes certain individuals in power. There are many mysterious why certain laws are passed and allowed to stand when we can see no good reason for

them, but we are called not to figure out all that God is doing in his infinite wisdom and power because that is beyond us, but we are called to know God and trust him. At the end of the Book of Job, we have these words of Job in Job 42:3, “**Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.**” We are called to know the will of God through what he says and commands, and to trust in him rather than walking in our own wisdom.

And this is a tough passage. We naturally want to usurp any power or authority over us. But, the reason why God gave us these commands is because he truly knows what is best and good for us and his glory, and I really want us to see that this morning. This is not something that we should just be resigned to do, but we should seek to be the best and most lawful citizens for the glory of God. So I want us to consider two points this morning.

1. First, we need to realize that God has given the ability to punish to government. Vv.4-5.

None of us like laws or constraints in our lives. But we have to admit that our society does so much better with government and policing than it would ever do without those powers to be. And to keep people obeying those laws is the threat of punishment if one does not follow those laws. It is amazing even in unstable countries where one government can easily be toppled that it is replaced right away with another form of government. And they will punish those who do not conform. And as we see in this passage that God means it for our good. We have that repeated refrain in the Old Testament book of Judges, that because there was no king in the land, everyone did what was right in his own sight. And we know it was disastrous.

So Paul continues his thought of verse 3, to follow the laws and authorities that are established because, “**for he is God’s servant for your good.**” And again, all you have to think is how difficult it would be to sleep at night if we did not have authorities and laws and government. There would be constant threat from the outside. The reason why we can even meet today without any threat of being ambushed and someone marching through those doors is because of the laws and the authorities that uphold those laws. We might complain so much but we really do benefit so much. And who do we have to thank? We have God to thank. Wicked people in government ultimately do the bidding of God, and even if they do not recognize it, they serve God’s purposes for his glory and the good of his people.

Look how verse 3 continues about the power that has been granted to the powers that be from God, “**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.**” The “he” there is talking about the governing powers that be. They have the power to execute or punish those who do wrong or those who break the law. So it is to your advantage to follow the laws of the land. The meaning of carry a sword is that the ordinary Roman soldier carried a sword. It spoke of the authority to keep the peace. If an official was traveling through a certain area, he was accompanied by a Roman cohort of soldiers, who had swords at their side to quell any uprising or any disturbance of the peace.

And what Paul might have in mind is that believers would not break any laws of the land to draw attention to themselves and other believers or the church in general. The Roman government was always concerned about any groups of people that would gather together regularly. They had what was known as the Pax Romana or Roman peace. They thought they could easily rebel and create an uprising. Our duty and joy is to come together to worship our God and make known Jesus Christ. We want to carry out the gospel mandate to make and mature disciples of Jesus Christ, and not seek to draw unnecessary attention to ourselves. Remember the words of Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, **“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings 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. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”** Our ultimate concern is not our personal freedom but that the gospel of Christ would be made known. Personal freedom is not the greatest need, but the gospel of Christ in the hearts of individuals.

If Christianity was chiefly about changing society and social norms than you think there would have been a different response of Jesus in John 6, where he fed the five thousand. They follow him to Capernaum, and more people follow him, but then he gives the teaching that you need to eat my flesh and drink my blood, and he defines what he means that they need to believe on him to have eternal life. And we see most of them cease to follow him. If he would have said the most important thing is to end your bondage to Rome and not to sin, they would have continued with him. Christianity can change society but it is not through popular uprisings, no matter even if we are losing our freedoms. It can only come through the new birth - through trusting Christ and having a new heart. Jesus gave the mandate to go into all the world and preach the gospel, baptizing, and teaching them to observe all things.

Personal liberties are a wonderful thing in our lives, but they like anything else can become an idol. And when that happens primary things like the gospel and obedience to Christ take a secondary position at best. If we can live a quiet and peaceful life and make Christ known, we are a blessed people, no matter what kind of government we exist under. No matter if it is the Roman government or the Canadian.

Look at verse 5, **“Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”** He is bringing his argument to a close as far as the relationship of the believer with the government, and you can see that because the command here is the same as verse 1. And that is we are to place ourselves under the authorities that be. He explains that we are not to do this just because if we do not we will suffer God’s wrath. The meaning here of God’s wrath is not so much in the life to come but through the entities that God has ordained that bring punishment to the wrong doer that he has just discussed. But the ultimate reason why we are to obey is because of conscience sake. God has given us each that internal conscience that either pleads our case or condemns us. And we are good at coming up with reasons of why we do what we do. And many times we reason in our hearts, “yes, I know what the Word of God says, but . . .” And here comes the disobedience. We do the thing that we know is wrong. And we excuse ourselves while

we do the misdeed, but afterward comes the conviction. We start to see God's will so clearly as revealed in his word. We try to silence that internal witness but we cannot.

He is saying, those who know the will of God through the word of God, it is not the threat that we might be discovered because we have already been discovered by God. Do the right thing in the sight of God even if you truly do understand how in the end this is going to work out for his glory and our good. Having a clear conscience is such a gift from God. Praise God in this tough area of life and these tough relationships that God has not left us without his revelation. Now we need to see, know, and act for his glory. And that is the next point.

2. We need to apply the teaching of God concerning the authorities over us. Vv. 6-7.

Now we come to an end of this section dealing with our submission to governing authorities, and Paul has a couple of applications that we do well to hear, so that we can apply it to our own situation. The first has to do with obeying the government in paying taxes, and the second is honouring them in how we talk and think about those officials. This is again, how we are to be witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our main focus is to obey them unless it becomes impossible to carry out our gospel mandate and obey our great God. Many godly pastors during the time that the Nazis came to power in Germany obeyed the government until it commanded them to preach a certain message or not to preach at all. Then they disobeyed, and in the end many of them lost their lives.

Look at verse 6, "**For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.**" Because of everything that Paul has said thus far, he says pay your taxes. And one of the most popular sins of our society is trying to skirt tax laws. People put money in off-shore accounts or people do not claim all the money they earn. People hate paying taxes. They think it is unjust and unfair. And think of it, because most of the taxes were paid but subjugated people, and what paid for the Romans over these people was taxes. People hated, just like today paying taxes. And certainly there is much good, such as policing, and road construction and infrastructure and the running of society as a whole that is paid for by taxes. And we should be thankful. There are also many things that we would hate that our tax dollars go to. There is abortion and much waste in our land.

But in the ancient land, if you did not pay your taxes, there was a punishment, and if a large group did not pay their taxes it could be seen as an act of aggression or war against the government. Paul is not concerned again with social upheaval. He is concerned that the government is a minister of God when it allows the church to carry on the task that God has given us to make and mature disciples for the glory of God. And for that to take place whether it is in a dictatorship or a democracy, we are to be the best citizens who obey the laws and pay taxes. How the government ultimately collects and spends those tax dollars, they will be answerable to God. We leave that judgment in his hands. And it does not mean that we cannot speak out against such issues as abortion or use the ballot box to change who is in power.

And then he says something that should convict all of us in verse 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.**" The

command here to “pay to all” is in the context of the government of the day. And the meaning of taxes and revenue here are talking about two different kinds of taxes. The first could be talking about a property tax where the second one could be talking about a tax on goods. But all was to be payed. But then he says, “**respect to whom respect is owed, honour to who honour is owed.**” And one of the most favourite activities is to verbally bash the politicians of the day, especially when they do things that we do not like. And it is not that we have a blind eye to what they are doing, but we have to remember who established these powers, and we have to be thankful if we are allowed to carry on the task of making Jesus Christ known. All that we see, every government and country will ultimately come to nothing, but only what we do for Jesus’s will last.

And it is almost when we come to politicians or to civil servants that we have a right to use the most condemning and harsh words possible about them. You can almost hear the anger and frustration coming out of people. And sometimes you would think our hope is in the government of the day rather than the One who is governing all and has established these powers that be.

There is an amazing passage where Paul appears before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23, and the High Priest orders his servants to smite Paul, and Paul knows this is illegal, and so he lashes out with his words against the High Priest who is a governing authority in Acts 23:3, “**God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?**” Then the brethren around Paul rebuke Paul saying that that this is none other than the High Priest of God, in other words, God put him in that position. Listen to Paul’s response to that rebuke in verse 5, “**And Paul said, ‘I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’**” We are to honour and speak respectfully of those who are over us.

And that concludes these opening seven verses of Romans 13, which so much has been written on. Our relationship to Jesus and Christ effects all our relationships. And there should be a marked difference the way believers treat one another, and even how they relate to the government of the day. These are difficult verses for us to truly accept, but our submission ultimately is not to the authorities that be, but to our great God. Let me end with these verses as discern the will of God, Proverbs 3:5-6, “**Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.**”