

Sermon Growth Guide

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HONOR IS DUE | Romans 13:1-7

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Key Verse: Romans 13:1 - "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

Big Idea: God establishes and judges all authority. Thus authority is both an ordering power and also a judged power under God.

Foundations

This admonition from Paul consists of three words repeated five times each and one opening qualification in 13:1. This is a huge signal for us in how to read and apply teaching on authority.

1. Submission and its cognate words, the Greek word *tasso*, meaning "appoint," as in appointed rule dominates the passage. Five times in seven verses this word occurs. The admonition is about submission to authorities.

2. Authority also occurs five times in this passage. The Greek word is *exousia*, meaning an existing (*ousia* meaning being or substance) authority. Authorities are existing structures of power under which we submit.

3. Fear also occurs five times. Fear can range from respect to actual anxious trembling. Fear is the emotion and action due to authorities to which we submit.

So, how are we to read this passage about submission, authority, and fear? If Paul did not introduce the admonition with 13:1, this would be an order to respect and fear political authority. But Paul raises this admonition from the political to the theological. All political authority is set and judged by God's transcendent authority.

Understanding God's Word

Our secular age (Charles Taylor's word) sets everything on an immanent footing, fancy word meaning there is no transcendent power such as God, only the political that operates on a secular plane. Thus everything is now political. This is where the arguments regarding authority lie. We in the church with Paul need not to neglect the political but set it in its proper hierarchy as penultimate not ultimate.

Applying God's Word

There is one Kingdom of God, Jesus's favorite phrase for the rule of God not only in heaven but on earth. We begin the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are to act within all the complexities of earthly authority under the final authority of God's Kingdom. The penultimate questions and critiques we apply should always be tempered with the ultimate question, "What is God's will in this situation?"

Witnessing God's Word

Our witness regarding submission in fear to authorities should always lift the power differential to the theological level and never leave it to the political. The psalmist says wisely, "Do not trust in princes or in the son of a human in whom there is no salvation," Ps 146:3.

How Today Romans brings us a topic that I imagine has just barely ever occurred to you, something we never talk about; it just doesn't come up. Politics. We just go about our everyday lives, working our jobs, caring for our families; it never occurs to us anything might be happening out in DC or Denver. Wouldn't that be nice? Politics went from one of the topics considered rude to bring up at the dinner table to being the only topic, the only conversation to have. Suddenly everything is politics. Art is politics. Sports is politics. Education is politics. Religion is politics. Every time I gather with pastors we moan about how politics has infiltrated the church. Every phrase of a sermon is scrutinized. "Is he for or against my side?" People leave First Pres because we are too liberal. People leave First Pres because we are too conservative. A long-standing couple, dear friends, left. I asked, "Was it something I said? Can we talk about it?" They said it wasn't anything said up front, it wasn't a theological difference. "We just can't worship with people who post those things on Facebook."

So, as we jump into the next section of Romans, a series we are calling Life Together, we start by asking the question: What does a Christian owe the government? What do we owe the state? In short, as Jesus summed up so poignantly, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21) Give honor where Honor Is Due. And, church, our commitment to being the family of God together must be bigger than our devotion to our country, our vision of a preferred future, or our political party. We try very hard to present the Kingdom of God from the Scriptures intersecting with contemporary life. That will correct your politics. That will correct my politics. When you feel that correction, you think, "Oh, the church is slipping; going Republican, going Democrat." Not really. We all feel corrected by the worldview of Scripture—which isn't in the middle of those two points like a golden mean, by the way. No. The Kingdom of God is much larger, all encompassing, breaking in from another plane entirely. Kingdom of God. That's the goal. We try.

Romans 13 is the most comprehensive passage on Christian civic responsibility in the Bible. It comes as a surprise to all parties. "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Romans 13:1) Think about who is in the room. Half are Roman Christians trying to figure out what it means to also be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. The other half are Jewish background believers who were exiled from Rome for years by Emperor Claudius and are just now getting their feet back under them. Rome is the oppressor. "Be subject to governing authorities? You mean Claudius? You mean Nero? You mean Pontius Pilate? I'm going to need some help." Paul gives them a baseline. The Bible gives the standard. The Word of God gives us a true north, a control. Here it is: give honor where honor is due. The Lord is sovereign. All authority is borrowed from God. What do I owe the government and its leaders? Start there. In so much as they have authority at all, their authority is from God. Be subject. Now, it could say "obey." It doesn't say obey, it says, "be subject; submit; give proper and due respect." Hold on to that point.

Romans 13 tells us that authorities demand our respect, even authorities we don't agree with. God has granted authority to our leaders. As much as we thrive on cynicism, superiority, judgmentalism, anti-institutionalism, as much as we are all sure we could do better if we were in their shoes... folks, that's just not what God wants of us. It isn't good for our souls. Honor for leadership is connected to the fifth commandment, "honor your father and mother." Honor for leaders is charged to the church in the letters of both Paul and Peter. Jesus told his followers to honor leaders, saying "render to Caesar what is Caesar's." I've been reflecting on a verse from Exodus 22 that gets quoted in Acts 23. "Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people." (Exodus 22:28) Paul quotes it, "Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people." (Acts 23:5). Do not speak ill of the ruler of the people. Huh. But

what if they make it really hard? This is not our way, is it? This is not the American way! What would it feel like to try? What would it feel like to allow confidence in God's sovereignty to make room in your heart to accept that a leader may just be there for a reason? What if we prayed for our leaders as Scripture commands, even those we don't agree with?

This does not equate to blind obedience or passive acceptance of injustice. We should not read here a blanket approval of Idi Amin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, or insert name here, as if everything these tyrants did is God's fault. God put them in power so God is to blame for their actions. No, God is not the author of evil. Watch what happens as we read on. The leader is in the service of the Lord and the people. This is where we remember it doesn't say "obey," it says, "submit; be subject to" and those are a little different. Obey is a word that belongs to God. Obey God, submit to leadership. What if those two things come into conflict? "Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than human beings!'" (Acts 5:29) When the command of the civic leader and the demands of God clash, go with God. But rest assured that will mean bearing the consequences of your actions. "Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." (Romans 13:2) Not damnation by God, but judgment from authorities who didn't like your choice to follow God over the state. Be ready to take your civil punishment in faithfulness to Jesus.

Submit to government authority because God has commissioned them to bring order and peace, and this is good. "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 you will be commended." (Romans 13:3) The more you break the speed limit the more nervous you are, right? Drive slow; you can breathe

easy. It helps the Gospel and extends your life not to obey the law. Because the government has the sword. "For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." (Romans 13:4) God empowers the state with proper force to restrain evildoers. You start to piece together the Biblical purpose of civil government here. Keep order, defend the populace, judge disputes, provide for safety, etc. The sword. That's some of us. CSPD. US Army. Air Force. Uniformed service members. Men and women who put their lives on the line to oppose chaos, to restrain evil and to promote good. Thank you. Honor is due.

Christians can serve. Christians see the use of force as an act of love. Real quick, if someone is threatening to kill a child and you have the power to stop it, is it loving to walk away and leave it to God? God put you there to exercise his judgment, maybe at risk of your own safety. I am not a pacifist, though it may have sounded like that last week where we trust God to avenge. Trusting God to avenge and taking responsibility in love to stop evildoers are not mutually exclusive. That, in fact, is what God has charged government to do, as a ministry, as a service. "For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." (Romans 13:4) The word is diakonos, servant, minister. Deacons will be surprised if we issue them swords. The service of restraining evil and celebrating good is a ministry God has ordained for the state.

What if the state is corrupt? What if the leadership abdicates its ministry? What if the government and its coercive powers are used not to stop evil and cultivate good, but to call what is good evil and force people to do what is evil and call it good? What then? Our conscience, our ultimate allegiance to God not human beings, calls us to live into that distinction between "obey" and "submit." Obey God. John Stott said, "The state's authority is derived from God... Thus the state is a divine institution with divine authority. Christians are not anarchists or subversives." But also, "Whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's law, civil

disobedience becomes a Christian duty.” Daniel stands up to Darius and sits in the lion’s den. The Hebrew midwives disobey Pharaoh’s order to kill infants; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego prefer the furnace to Nebuchadnezzar’s orders to cease their prayers, and on and on. Obey God; serve the leadership. Charles Hodge wrote, “The gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy.”

“This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing.” (Romans 13:6) Government is a service, a common grace for the common good. What do we owe the government? Taxes. It’s not un-Christian to pay your taxes. How much? How big a bite? That’s up for debate, but the teaching is clear: “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” (Romans 13:7) Taxes referred to what was collected and taken to Rome. Revenue was the local duties and tariffs. Respect is reverent veneration for those in high office. Honor is esteem due to a public servant. Soldiers know this. If an officer comes along, you sharply render a salute. They may be an absolute disaster! The salute belongs to the office, the rank. Honor is due.

How about for us? I study Romans 13 and think of the long history of humanity and the horrible governments, dictators and tyrants the church has endured. And we complain about our country! We break relationships over our two parties. Never in the history of the world has a government been so carefully constructed to be a government of the people, by the people, for the people. We get to shape it. The deepest truths are not shouted in streets by mobs. Matthew described Jesus by quoting Isaiah, “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He

will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.” (Matthew 12:18-21) Jesus never used the mob, and the mob never served Jesus. Civic discourse, faithful participation in political leadership, voting and elections, this is how we change affairs in this nation.

Life together. It means the “us” is more important than the “U.S.” You might tell me you are going to vote for Genghis Khan. You might have Barney the purple dinosaur on the ticket. You genuinely believe this is the best way to bring the greatest good to the most people in biblical conviction. Okay. I might love to have a little civic discourse. Can I ask what you see? How you think about it? Okay. But let me tell you this, you are my brother in Christ. His Kingdom is bigger. His family is wider. His call on you and me and our life together is more important. Our mission is not to gain votes. Our mission is to save souls. Nations will rise and fall but the Church of God will endure forever. Honor is due to the government. Honor is due to you, my brother. Honor is due to Christ, Lord of All.