

Sermons through

Romans

God's Ministers

Romans 13:1-7

Part Two

Resisting God's Ordination

With Study Questions

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Resisting God's Ordination

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-7).

Introduction

Years ago I found myself being grilled in a pastoral examination. I didn't mind the aggressive nature of the questioning. Being in the ministry may require a tender heart but it is not for the faint of heart. The committee had been made aware of my convictions concerning that the law of God. I believed both the Old and New Testaments, should be the primary resource to determine what should constitute laws in the civil arena.

To be honest, I didn't think (at the time) that it was all that controversial of a position to hold among Christians. The law of God is an extension of the character and nature of God and is, therefore, immutable (unchangeable). Modes may change but the underlying principle is always the same. For example, we no longer sacrifice lambs (Exodus 12:3) but the message contained in the Lord's Supper is precisely that which was given in the sacrifice of the lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7).

It was during this exam that I was challenged with a thought

(regarding the passage under our current consideration) that I find vexing to this very day. One of the men testing me offered Romans 13:1-7 as a refutation of the notion that the law of God (found in Scripture) ought to provide the basic moral structure for the law of the land. Without a great deal of explaining (since it was an exam and not a debate) he quoted the portion of Romans 13:1 which reads, **“the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”**

His reasoning was that since God appoints people into positions of political authority, we should recognize their decisions to be from God and, therefore, legitimate.

Not terribly anxious to be into a debate myself (with people who could fail me in an exam), my only response was, “Are we to conclude that God has not given these authorities a standard by which they should properly govern?” Fortunately, I did pass the exam, “but only as through fire.”

I have come to realize since then that Romans 13:1-7 is a highly charged passage (being so political in nature) with multiple interpretations. On one end you have those who view this as the government having carte blanche power which is not to be questioned. The Christian, according to this view, is to submit (or subject) themselves to the government absolutely and without question on all matters.

On the other end of the spectrum you have those who would argue that the governing authorities are only legitimate to the extent that they, themselves bow the knee to Christ. Those in political power must acknowledge that their authority is a derived authority (it comes from God), given to them by God (certainly a true statement). If they fail to pursue this, their authority is illegitimate and Christians need not obey them at all and, in fact, are called to resist.

There are also those who argue that the governing authorities in the political arena are distinct from the governing authorities in the ecclesiastical (church) or personal moral arenas. They assert that these leaders (even if not Christians) are made in the image of God, have a law written upon their hearts, have access to general revelation (the law of God revealed through the creation) and will through that “natural law” rule equitably.

I have to say that I think all of these approaches are problematic. And I only mention them so we are all aware of how broad the landscape when it comes to such a political passage.

Review

In our least session we discussed the tranquility which begins when we acknowledge that it is God who makes and deposes kings and laws. We also touched on the dangers of desiring a king and giving earthly kings or leaders (no matter how much we might agree with them) that place in our hearts which belong to Christ and Christ alone.

...but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15).

We may wish to ask, at this point, why the Apostle Paul would bring up the topic of, what the Westminster Confession of Faith calls, the civil magistrate at this point in the epistle.

In a painfully brief review, we recall that the first eight chapters of Romans informs us of our sinful condition and how it is by grace through faith that we find peace with God. That section ends with a beautiful expression of how, since it is God who justifies, nothing can separate us from His love.

The Apostle Paul then answers an objection he would anticipate from his fellow Israelites regarding the faithfulness of God to keep His covenant with Israel. He explains how not all Israel was truly Israel-similar to have not everyone who goes to church is truly a Christian. God made a covenant (a promise to save) and kept it. But the covenant always involved faith over flesh.

Finally, in chapter twelve he begins to instruct on how we should live in light of these great mercies. We should not think too highly of ourselves, we should exercise our gifts toward mutual edification, we are to love one another exercising patience, prayer, generosity and hospitality. He finishes chapter twelve with an exhortation to **“Repay no one evil for evil”** and **“do not avenge yourselves”** since vengeance belongs to the Lord. We are rather to love, feed and provide welfare for our enemies. In doing so we **“overcome evil with good.”**

This transition in chapter thirteen segues nicely when one considers

the implications of a loving response to those who do evil. Paul's readers might have assumed that the New Covenant had no vehicle in place to contend with crime and criminals. Of course that is not at all true. The natural transition from chapter twelve to thirteen amounts to Paul informing Christians not to take law into their own hands. God has an institution for those commit crimes.

What is the difference between a sin and a crime? A crime is a sin which God has determined to be punished by his instituted earthly authority. The first example of this is found after the flood.

**Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed;
For in the image of God He made man (Genesis 9:6).**

This God ordained institution continues to this very day. That which was written by Moses thousands of years before the Apostle Paul is restated as this chapters begins.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves (Romans 13:1, 2).

Appointed by God

There is a temptation to jump immediately into all the exceptions to the rule clearly put forth by the Apostle in his opening statement. This passage certainly does not give the government *carte blanche* authority. It is also an error to suggest that we should only subject ourselves to authority figures who are seeking to follow Christ. And there are untold problems with the notion that God has some other resource and plan for the nations and their preservation and redemption.

But the clear rule put forth by the Apostle in this passage is one of willing subjection *hypotassestho*. This is no trick word. It means to submit to the orders or directives of someone. And we are to do this, recognizing that God has put this person in that place. That person has been **"appointed"** by God to play that role in our lives.

Many of us have been brought up in a culture which either detests or ignores the notion of authority. My formative years were in the sixties

which was an era of strong anti-establishmentism. Disrespecting teachers, police officers, parents, etc., was strongly encouraged and something about which we would brag.

The current passage speaks of the authorities in the civil arena (those who bear the sword and administer God's justice/vengeance), but the Scriptures give many examples of those in authority: parents, husbands, elders, employers, etc. We must recognize that to disrespect or disregard these authorities is an affront against the God who placed them in our lives.

And our willing subjection to these authorities should not be merely (although it may include this) because they can spank us, put us on restriction, fire us or because they **"bear the sword"**. In verse five Paul we are told to submit for **"conscience sake."** Simply put, because we know it is the right thing to do.

When I was a teenager I had a run-in with a security guard down at the Redondo Pier. I can't recall what the issue was, but I recall telling him there wasn't much he could do since I could outrun him. He pointed to his gun and asked me if I could outrun a .38. I shared this story years later with one of our elders (Dan Koblosh) who made the observation that instead of pointing to his gun, he should have been able to merely point to his badge.

This lack of respect for God appointed authority has been the ruin of households, churches, businesses and societies. My little story about the security guard pointing to his gun has become an epidemic in our culture for those who have no respect for law enforcement. Business owners and management have become the villains. Fathers and husbands are routinely presented as buffoon-like Homer Simpsons who we laugh at rather than revere.

Even in the church the office of elder (an office to which Christians are clearly told to subject themselves-Hebrews 13:17), has become an invisible and superfluous entity. More than once over the years I have noticed professing Christians during the Lord's Supper entirely disregard the instructions during the fencing of the Table (to be a believer, baptized and member in good standing of a Christian church). They are not compelled whatsoever to respect the elder's God-given appointment to take responsibility for the sacraments.

I am not conveying this with any sense of frustration. I would have been a ring-leader. But we live in a Christian climate that has little regard

for those appointed by God for specific roles and tasks in our lives. Christians baptize people and administer the Lord's Supper extraneously from the church. We do this (and I have done this) ignorant of what an act of rebellion/sedition this is. And how destructive this has been for the souls of men and women.

A Serious Sin

I am not ignorant of the fact that many of us are surrounded by authority figures that are so incompetent, negligent or even evil that the notion of willing subjection appears unthinkable! And we will discuss how those in positions of authority are called to make submission to them a joyous task. But our continual clamoring about how feckless our leaders, parents, elders and so on, are only serves to remind us of our naturally rebellious hearts. And this is a serious sin!

At a time when the Levitical priests were to offer the final say in criminal matters, we read of the severity of disregarding their authority and the verdicts they would render.

The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. ¹³ And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again (Deuteronomy 17:12, 13).

The word "**presumptuous**" *yzidun* literally means to boil. It carries the idea that in our passions we disregard God-given truth and respond impulsively rather than in wisdom. The punishment is severe because it results in the utter breakdown of society and inevitable oppression of the innocent.

This call to submission is repeated numerous times in the New Testament. Paul offers the general introduction of submission in Ephesians 5:21 where we are called to submit...

"...to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). He then provides the hierarchy of that submission.
²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord...
Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is

right...Bondservants obey your earthly masters” (Ephesians 5:22: 6:1, 5).

We read in Titus:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work (Titus 3:1).

Again in 1 Peter:

Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Let us not fall into that category, as Peter wrote in his second epistle, of those **“who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority” (2 Peter 2:10).**

Unwitting Servants

Let us also be reminded that the audience to whom Paul and Peter wrote were under Nero-a Caesar whose acts were so barbaric that it would take an entire chapter to merely recount them. But for now let us recognize that the people were under an authority who would make them pay with their lives in the infamous Circus Maximus where they would be eaten by lions and cut down by gladiators for the mere amusement of the masses.

I have read that Paul (or Peter) did not have this ungodly government in mind when he wrote this epistle. One must ask, what other emperor/king *basilea* would Peter have in mind? What other authority would the readers of Paul have had in mind than the one they were currently under? Was there a Christian government to be found anywhere on earth at the time of the writing of this epistle-or since for that matter?

Let us be aware that God’s servants-His ministers-the very rods in

His hand, may not at all intend to serve Him. The ungodly king of Assyria was **“the rod”** of God’s **“anger”** (Isaiah 10:5), even though he did not **“so intend and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy”** (Isaiah 10:7). That king was a mere axe boasting over the one **“who hews with it”** (Isaiah 10:15).

When Jesus heard Pilate appeal to his own authority to release or crucify Him, Jesus didn’t dismiss Pilate’s authority. He merely told Pilate from whence his authority came.

We will address the proper response to those who are ungodly in positions of authority. But let us, at this juncture, check our own hearts when it comes to despising God for the authorities He has chosen for us. We are to pursue a general cheerful, loving, willfully submissive disposition of and toward those in authority in our lives. Do we truly think that it is a good strategy of amelioration (of improving the matter) to bestow upon our leaders a spirit of contempt?

Will wives make their husbands greater spiritual leaders through brow-beating and ridicule? Will children foster more loving, wise and responsible parents through scorn and dismissiveness? Will police officers become more discerning and exercise greater restraint if confronted with loud, threatening and abrupt behavior?

In the verses which follow we will discuss in greater detail how civil magistrates (all in authority) should understand their derivative authority and the accountability to God that brings. But let us not lose the spirit of the opening admonition. And let us recognize that a heart that is capable of being changed for the better will more efficiently be sanctified by giving that honor where the honor is due.

Years ago during our question and answer time I found myself in the middle of an uncomfortable conversation. A member was speaking of the attributes requisite of a minister. Everyone agreed that humility was a chief trait for the post. Then I was asked why, if that is the case, do we call you Reverend? This was asked recognizing the word means one who is to be revered, respected. It seemed as if the very title weighs against the notion of humility.

But the conversation had a profound effect upon me. Because if the post of pastor calls for reverence, I have something to live up to. There is a gravity extending deeper than what I had hitherto considered. If you respect and honor a parent, a husband, a boss, an elder or a police officer it may serve to help remind them of responsibility upon their shoulders.

And even more deeply the source from where that responsibility is derived.

Questions for Study

1. Should those who minister have a tender heart? Should they be faithful of heart? Why or why not (pages 2, 3)?
2. In your initial reading of Romans 13:1-7, what is the general message when it comes to those in authority (page 3)?
3. Give a brief review of Romans 1-12. Why do you suppose the Spirit placed the topic of civil magistrates in this context (pages 4, 5)?
4. What is the admonition contained in the Apostle Paul's opening statement in verses 1 and 2 (pages 5, 6)?
5. What have you noticed to be the general disposition of those in authority in our culture? Can you give examples (pages 5, 6)?
6. Why should we submit to those in authority (page 6)?
7. Why is disrespect and dishonor of authority such a serious sin (pages 7, 8)?
8. Do God's servants always know they are His servants? Explain (pages 8, 9)?
9. How should Christians respond to those who are poor or incompetent in their exercise of authority (page 9)?