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*“Be Subject To Governing Authorities”*

ROMANS 13:1-7, PT 1

SEPTEMBER 29, 2024

PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

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## AT A GLANCE

How Christians relate to the state is not secondary to the gospel. As Paul makes clear in Romans 13, our relation to the governing authorities is part of our response to the glorious gospel Paul laid out in chapters 1-11. It is part of how we express genuine love for the Lord. It is part of laying our lives down as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to Him. But how should Christians relate to the state? Paul gives us clear instruction in today’s passage.

## INTRODUCTION

It’s good to be back in Romans, isn’t it?! It’s been about three months since our last sermon in Romans 12. We’re in the final major section of Paul’s letter to the Romans. We’ve identified this theme as “Fellowship” because so much of it has to do with how we live with other people, both in the church and outside the church. This passage we’re studying today is probably the go-to passage for many people when they consider what is the responsibility of the Christian as it relates to the State. We have dual citizenship, in the Kingdom of Heaven and here. So where do our loyalties to the former override our loyalties to the latter? That is what I hope to answer over the next three weeks.

## ROMANS 13:1-7

**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. <sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup>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, <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup>For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup>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.**

## LET LOVE BE GENUINE

This change in chapter doesn’t mean there’s a change in subject. There were no chapters or verses in Paul’s original letter to the Romans so we should take the chapter break here lightly. In fact, I see a strong connection between this passage and the previous one so it might be helpful to revisit that briefly.

Paul began his final major theme of Romans in chapter 12. In verses 3-8 he addressed our relationship to the Church, exhorting us to use spiritual gifts to serve the body. He then listed several qualities that should exist and grow in the life of a believer, beginning with “Let love be genuine” in verse 9.

If we look down to Romans 13:8 we see that Paul returns to the subject of love saying, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other” concluding in verse 10, “love is the fulfilling of the law.” This what

we call a literary *inclusio* or envelope; the framing of a section of scripture with the same issue or concept on each side.

Whenever we see an *inclusio* we should at least consider that everything in between may be related to that issue. Here the enveloping concept is love. Whatever comes to mind when we think of love, what we need to know is that genuine love (12:9) is love that fulfills God's Law (13:10). So whatever it is, genuine love honors God first and foremost.

If I'm right about this being an *inclusio*, then everything between 12:9 and 13:10 seems to be concerned with this law-fulfilling genuine love. Three reasons I think this is so:

First, both passages convey that genuine love is pure. In Romans 12:9-21, Paul expounds upon "genuine love" exhorting us to abhor what is evil and hold fast to what is good. He appeals again to the concept of moral purity in Romans 13:8-10.

Second, both passages appeal to God's vengeance. In Romans 12:19 we read that we should not seek vengeance, for "vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." In Romans 13:4, we're told that government is God's "avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

Third and finally, I see a transitional statement in 13:11, suggesting this is where Paul shifted his thoughts from the thought began in Romans 12:9.

For these reasons, I read 12:9-13:10 as one explanation of what it means to "let love be genuine." Whether I'm right or wrong isn't all that consequential, but here's why I'm belaboring this point: I see Romans 13:1-7, how we relate to governing authorities as an expression of Paul's command in Romans 12:9 to "Let love be genuine."

## GENUINE LOVE SUBMITS TO AUTHORITY

So, here's the premise: genuine love that fulfills the law causes us to submit to governing authorities. Before we move on, this begs the question, "Genuine love according to whom?" In whose eyes should love be determined to be genuine? Is Paul concerned that *the world* approves of our love? I don't believe so and I once again return to Romans 12.

*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."* Romans 12:1-2

In light of this, I am actually going to argue that all of chapter 12 and 13 is an exegesis of what it means to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God; genuine love in verse 9 being a primary expression of acceptable sacrifice.

Paul was not concerned that our lives or our love be approved by the world, but that it is approved by God. Genuine love, therefore, is love that God judges to be genuine. It is love that God accepts. And what has been made abundantly clear in Romans is that God's assessment and the world's assessment are almost always diametrically opposed.

It's important to establish this at the outset of this study of Romans 13 because we're going to address some culturally sensitive issues and it's tempting to want to walk a line so that we do not say anything that the world would disapprove of. At the end of the day, the world will never consider Christian love genuine love. Nor does that matter. We cannot assess our positions based on whether the world approves of them or not. It's also crucial to note that how we relate to governing authorities is found right here in the context of genuine love, and more broadly in the laying down of our lives as living sacrifices to God.

How we respond to moral, cultural, and political issues is therefore not secondary to the gospel. It is a mistake that many pastors make, and one I made in 2020, to censor themselves when it comes to politics

and culture. “Just preach the Gospel” was the virtue-signal that kept many well-intentioned pastors, like myself, silent in those tumultuous years.

## THE GOSPEL AND POLITICS

Politics addresses every area of our lives and to imagine that the gospel doesn't have anything to do with politics is naïve. How we think about and relate to our governing authorities is an essential matter of genuine, law-fulfilling love. We cannot put our heads in the sand with politics and culture if we want our love to be genuine. We need to lay an essential foundation first. This morning let's focus on verses 1 and 2.

## ALL AUTHORITY COMES FROM ABOVE

**Verse 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.** This is not a one-off statement. It's not written for a particular cultural moment, but rather it's a biblical principle taught and accepted broadly by the first church. Peter wrote, *“Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”* 1 Peter 2:13-14

Why did both Paul and Peter command the church to submit to governing authorities? Aren't we citizens of Heaven? Isn't it said that this world is not our home? They command this because human authority is instituted by God; it is given from above. Consider Jesus' response when Pilate told Him he had the authority to set Jesus free or crucify Him, *“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”* John 19:11.

Hear what God said to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, *“..and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.”* Daniel 4:32

The pagan king of Persia, King Cyrus, spoke truth when he said, *“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.”* Ezra 1:2 Every king, every emperor, every governor, president, every ruler rules according to God's sovereignty.

Like the Church and the family, government is a divinely ordained institution. That means government should submit to Jesus just like the family and the Church. Does it? No, at least not generally. But that doesn't mean it fails to serve His purposes.

Most families, and many churches, do not submit themselves to Jesus, yet by common grace they serve His purpose of multiplying the human race and restraining evil. The failures of some in each institution does not stop us from acknowledging and pursuing what they ought to be.

We want every family to function under Jesus' headship. We want every local church to function under Jesus' headship. And we want our government to function under Jesus' headship. I'm not referring to a theocracy; I'm saying God has ordained government to reward good and restrain evil. We should want our government to do both. We should want our government to enforce just laws for the good of society. Humans flourish when the authorities reward justice and restrain evil.

And we should humbly submit to it in its exercise of authority over our lives because it is a gift of common grace. **There is no authority except from God.**

## BE SUBJECT

Therefore, Paul says **let every person be subject to the governing authorities.** Submit. Follow. Obey. I know, we always want to appeal to the limits when we hear those words, submit and obey. “But, what if they do this?” Why are we so prone to justify not submitting? I believe it's because in our rebellious hearts our natural inclination is to resist authority and resist God.

Paul knew that if Christians could satisfy our naturally rebellious hearts and justify it with religious language, boy that's enticing. If we can scratch the itch to resist and rebel and we can couch it in religious jargon and act like we have a right to rebel, that is really tempting. Like any other sin, our duty is to put this sin of rebellion to death.

Are there limits to Christian submission to authority? Of course there are. Jesus made the most important political statement ever uttered when He said, "...render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." *Matthew 22:21*

In this statement, Jesus both validated government and set its limits. Governing authorities have a legitimate claim to our willful submission. However, that claim is not without limits and Christians are not to be uncritical in their thinking.

## WHEN RESISTANCE INCURS JUDGMENT

It's important for us to wrestle with this and understand the legitimacy and limits of governing authority because Paul warns of judgment coming for those who resist. **Verse 2, Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.**

We ought to be slow to resist legitimate authority. If you decide you must resist authorities, you need to know that unless you're doing so out of genuine obedience to God, you are in fact resisting Him.

Whose **judgment** will we receive if we resist this God-appointed authority? From a practical perspective, certainly the governing authority's. If you break a law, you're going to be judged and punished. That is the prerogative of the State and it's given that prerogative by God to restrain evil. It's morally right for governing authorities to enforce just laws.

But there's another judgment coming, which is God's. When you resist what God has appointed, you incur not only human judgment but His. This is a sober warning, especially to modern-day Americans. Our culture is pretty toxic right now and we're quick to trash people in authority. We're quick to say, "It's a conspiracy," which the bible also warns us against. (Isaiah 8:12) Let's be slow to jump on that bandwagon.

It does beg the question, though, about what to do with illegitimate authority? The German church in the 1930's and 1940's is a classic tale of uncritical application of this text and millions of Jews were tortured and murdered because of the church's failure to resist illegitimate rule.

Do we have the right to resist authority because we don't like their policies? Because we didn't vote for them? Because we'd govern differently "if we were in charge?" I don't think we have that right biblically, but I do think we have the right and the responsibility to resist any authority in three definite situations.

## WHEN RESISTANCE SERVES GOD

*First, if it forbids what God commands.* The story of Daniel highlights this for us. When King Darius decreed that no man could pray to anyone but him for 30 days or be thrown into the lion's den, what did Daniel do? He prayed with open windows.

In Acts 4, Peter responded to the council's order to no longer preach in the name of Jesus, "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*" *Acts 4:19-20*

Confronted again in Acts 5, Peter simply replied, "*We must obey God rather than men.*" *Acts 5:29* Genuine love requires that you resist when an authority forbids you from doing what the Lord commands.

*Second, if it commands what God forbids.* Again, we can look to the book of Daniel and the example of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, more commonly known by their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Ordered to bow down in worship of the golden image, these men stood. They

could have kneeled while “worshipping God in their hearts” but they understood that even to go through the motions would be tantamount to denying their God.

So, they resisted illegitimate authority. Genuine love requires that you resist when an authority commands you to do what the Lord forbids.

*Finally, if submission conflicts your conscience. We must never go against our conscience to obey authority. Paul says, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Romans 14:23* Does an authority ask you to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable in your spirit? I don’t mean it’s hard, or it’s inconvenient, or it’s not exactly what you thought you’d have to do in your line of work, or it’s beneath you.

I mean does it not sit well in your spirit? Have you prayed and sought council and prayed some more and you simply cannot justify doing this thing because if you did you feel like you’d be sinning against the Lord, even if you can’t find a clear mandate in scripture? Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. Just be really careful that you’re not justifying a rebellious spirit by calling it a conflicted conscience.

In the words of the late R.C. Sproul, “...Christians will voice their ‘no’ to Caesar's unauthorized demands the more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say ‘yes’ to his authorized demands.” Most of what government expects of us is legitimate and ought to be obeyed. To resist it is to resist God. Be careful when you feel that tinge of rebellion in your soul; you are accountable to God for how you submit to authority.

When an authority commands you to do what God forbids or forbids what God commands, genuine love requires you to resist. Same when they demand that you violate your conscience. But as a rule, genuine, law-fulfilling love submits to governing authorities. This is part of laying down your life as a living sacrifice.

## CHECK YOUR HEART

How’s your heart? Is it rebellious or submissive? Do you find yourself looking for reasons to resist authority or do you typically submit? Take some time to examine your hearts as we prepare to observe the Lord’s Supper.

As Peter was exhorting the church to live submissive, humble lives, he appealed to our Lord’s example, saying, *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” 1 Peter 2:21-25*

If Jesus submitted Himself to governing authorities even to the point of death so that you and I could be forgiven our sin, shouldn’t we die to sin and live to righteousness? Shouldn’t we follow the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls by walking in His footsteps? Let love be genuine, let every person be subject to governing authorities for there is not authority except from God.

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