
“God’s Servant & Avenger”

ROMANS 13:1-7 PT 2

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AT A GLANCE

Governing authorities is one of the things God has given to the world as a gift of common grace. Paul calls governing authorities and sword-bearers “servants” and “ministers” of God. No doubt few who fill this role recognize their status, but they will all answer to Him for it. Christians are called to be subject to them because they fulfill an important role of maintaining law and order in the world. Are there limits? Of course, but a general rule, Christians should be grateful and willfully submit themselves to the authorities placed over them.

INTRODUCTION

This morning, we return to Romans 13:1-7 in part two of now a four-part treatment of this text. Last week we studied verses one and two and I made the case that how we relate to our governing authorities is no tertiary matter to the Gospel. It’s not irrelevant.

Rather, it falls in a broader context of scripture that describes how we ought to respond to the Gospel. Our lives ought to reflect a grateful and self-sacrificing heart because of the glorious grace God has shown us.

We are told in Romans 12:9 to let love be genuine. As I laid out last week, genuine love is love that fulfills the law of God. It is a love that God accepts as genuine. It’s a sincere love for God that expresses itself in how we live our lives. As this passage reveals, how we relate to our government is one expression of our relationship with the Lord.

Today we’ll continue by looking at verses three through six. We’ll talk about law and justice. Exciting right?! Well, it is a gift of God’s grace and for that we should be excited and eager to submit. Amen?! Let’s read..

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

DO WHAT IS GOOD, HAVE NO FEAR

Here Paul expounds upon his statement in verse 2 that whoever resists authority resists God and will receive judgment, saying in **verse 3 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, for he is God's servant for your good.**

This is a broad, biblical principle, not an absolute promise. Paul wrote this letter before the Roman Emperor Nero blamed the great fire of Rome in 64AD on Christians and started systematically persecuting them in an awful perversion of justice.

Much closer to that fire, but still before it, the Apostle Peter asked, *“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?”* Same general idea as what Paul said in verse 3. For the most part governing authorities only punish wrongdoing. That’s an incredible gift.

Nevertheless, Peter saw the possibility that this may not always be the case and continued, *“But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,”* 1 Peter 3:13-14

We believe Paul was beheaded after being imprisoned in Rome though he did nothing deserving death. Peter was crucified upside down on a cross, again undeserving of death. This principle wasn’t fulfilled in their lives. Nor was it fulfilled in Jesus’ life. It may not be fulfilled in yours.

Remember Peter’s words, “even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them.” And the words of Jesus, *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* Matthew 10:28

Many, many Christians have been abused and robbed of earthly justice at the hands of their governing authorities. Millions of Christians today are at risk of this very thing. We have missionaries in very dangerous places. And if we’re not careful, we could see this very thing in our own nation. Arguably we did see this in our nation in 2020 with the unlawful litigation of churches for gathering together. Grace Church in California comes to mind.

GOVERNMENT IS GOD’S SERVANT

Nevertheless, here is the biblical principle: government is **God’s servant for your good**. God has ordained that those in authority respect their citizens and do not punish **good conduct**, but only **bad**.

We acknowledge that government is not immune to human corruption; there are corrupt governing authorities and corrupt enforces. But as a general rule, governing authorities are charged by God to punish bad conduct, not good.

This by itself serves the good of mankind. Where there are no consequences for evil, evil runs rampant. We don’t have to speculate about this. It’s already written for us, *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* Judges 21:25

Even the worst, most tyrannical government is better than no government. Look at Haiti. The former government was corrupt, but life was better under that corrupt government than it is right now under marauding gangs who are ravaging the country.

Look at just about any dystopian movie, any post-apocalyptic movie and you’ll see a representation of the true heart of man – unrestrained evil is merciless. It’s like the writers and directors of these movies understand that where evil is unrestrained, men devolve into primal actors carrying out the

most heinous evil you can imagine. As a gift of His grace, God gives us government and law enforcement to restrain that evil.

GOVERNMENT IS GOD'S AVENGER

Paul continues in **verse 4, 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.** If you break the law, you should expect to be punished for it.

I'm sure you've found yourself suddenly coming up on a police cruiser parked in the median of the road or highway just over the crest of a hill. Panic sets in as your eyes dart to your speedometer. Your heartrate increases and you lock your eyes on the lightbar atop the cruiser holding your breath until you've passed and put some ground between you.

But this only happens if you know that you're breaking the law. If you're not speeding or driving with a headlight out or a taillight out; if you're not swerving between the lanes, or driving a stolen vehicle, you typically have nothing to worry about.

You may or may not like the governing authorities and the ones who "bear the sword." But who do you call when someone is breaking into your house? Sword-bearers, aka the police. Who do you send overseas to deal with terrorists? Sword-bearers, aka the military.

Sword-bearers are those who have the God-given authority to mete out punishment, up to and including the taking of life. This is what Paul means by that phrase "bear the sword." He's referring to government's right to utilize capital punishment to enforce its laws and protect its citizens.

SELF-JUSTICE, A TERRIBLE ALTERNATIVE

What is the alternative? Self-justice, which quickly devolves into savagery. It's the way of gangs. We should be most grateful that the Lord has not left it up to us to avenge ourselves of the evil done to us. Praise the Lord that He has instituted governing authorities and laws and law-enforcers who are charged with meting out God's punishment against evil. Thank the Lord for justice.

This verse is one of the clearest and most direct biblical basis for the use of force by governing authorities to restrain evil. As a Christian active duty soldier, I was asked how I justified being in the military. As a pastor and Army Reservist I was asked how I justify being a minister of the gospel and a minister of the state as a sword-bearer. It's not complex in my mind. God ordained both institutions. Both serve God's order and bring justice to the world. Both are righteous when they deal righteously. This passage is what undergirds Christian Just War theory.

Every nation-state has the God-given right and responsibility to protect its own citizens from invasion, attack, and legitimate threat of destruction. When a government fails to protect its citizens from outside threats, it is failing to perform its most basic God-given function. It is immoral.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

This is why we should unequivocally support Israel's and Ukraine's right to defend themselves. Its also why we should unequivocally resist open national borders. A nation without borders is not a nation. It is the responsibility of our governing authorities to protect us from invaders.

People also wonder about the Christian ethic as it relates to the death penalty. They wonder how the taking of a life is justifiable punishment. In fact, some would pit the Christian ethic about the death penalty against our position on abortion, claiming that if we believe the latter is wrong, the former must be wrong as well.

But that is flawed logic. It's equivocating the just punishment by the state, God's avenger of evil, against an individual rightfully convicted of first-degree or capital murder with the unjust murder of an innocent victim in the womb. These are not the same premises and therefore do not require the same conclusion.

The Lord taught us in Genesis 9 that the taking of a life demands life in return. He commanded Noah, *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed for God made man in his own image."*
Genesis 9:6

For those who do abide by the law, the governing authority is a blessing. Whenever you call the police to respond to a break-in of your home, whenever you see soldiers deploy overseas to defeat terrorists who are seeking your destruction, you witness **God's avenger** do his work.

When you observe the authorities arrest a criminal and you hear the judge pronounce the verdict and sentence that person to a just punishment, you are watching God pour out His **wrath on the wrongdoer**.

Do police officers get it wrong sometimes? Yes, and usually they become the one's against whom the sword is turned, and the wrath of God is poured out. Do judges and juries fail to execute justice? Yes, and we have a system of appeals and protocols to pursue justice. Beyond that, though, governing authorities and sword-bearers will stand accountable for how they have handled the sword as God's servants and avengers. They will face God's judgment if they have failed to restrain evil and reward good.

There are many Christians who have no other recourse. You ought to thank the Lord that you live in a time and place where you have recourse to redress your grievances against the state. But even so, you may not receive true justice here. Your loved ones may not receive true justice here. There comes a time when we, like Jesus, must simply continue to entrust our souls to Him who judges justly.

Nevertheless, all of this is a gift of grace given to us by the Supreme Judge and enforcer of the Law. In His execution of justice on earth, the Lord has given us servants and avengers to reward good and restrain evil.

BE SUBJECT

Acknowledging this should inspire in us a desire to submit to authorities willingly. **Verse 5** says **Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience**. Not only does our subjection to governing authorities protect us from God's wrath, namely the punishment inflicted by His avengers who bear the sword, but it also protects our **conscience**.

Believers recognize that it is not only wise and beneficial to be subject to governing authorities, but it is also God's will. It is part of our obedient and grateful response to God for His glorious grace. It is living out genuine love, a love that fulfills God's law, as we lay down our lives as living sacrifices.

Not only does our subjection free our conscience with the Lord, but something beautiful happens when you make a habit of doing the right thing. You live with a free conscience about the state as well. You live free from worrying about being caught doing the wrong thing.

Years ago, when I was on staff at a church in the suburbs of Dallas, one of the other pastors had to make a visit as police chaplain to the wife of a man who ended his own life in his car in a parking lot. It was suspected that the man had been caught in some serious trouble and both the humiliation and the fear of punishment were too much for him to bear.

I wish that husband and father would have repented of his sin and accepted the consequences rather than ending his life. It was a senseless tragedy, but it also serves as a warning to us.

Tragically, that man experienced this truth, *“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.” Luke 12:2-3*

God is a God of justice as well as mercy. While God forgives all our sins the moment we place our faith in His Son, Jesus, that doesn't mean our sins won't be found out. It doesn't mean we won't still suffer the just consequences of them.

HOPE FOR ULTIMATE JUSTICE IS IN CHRIST ALONE

We are accountable to God for how we submit to the authorities He has appointed over us. In Christ, we are free to submit to governing authorities because we ultimately put our trust and our hope in Christ, not the governing authorities.

We've laid down our lives as a living sacrifice, we fear God, not man and what he can do to the body. We believe that to be absent the body is to be present with the Lord. And we entrust our souls to Him who judges justly.

And we ought to thank the Lord that we don't have to avenge ourselves because God has given that responsibility to those who bear the sword. For Americans, it's our legal and judicial system, our law enforcement, and our military. These institutions work together to restrain evil and reward good.

Our God has given us these **ministers** to serve Him for our good. Ultimately, they too will stand accountable for how they wielded that sword in submission to, or rebellion against, Him.

Christian, how we relate to authority is a matter of gospel-response. It's how we practically demonstrate genuine love for God and gratitude for His grace. As I stated strongly last week, this does not give us excuse to be uncritical in our thinking, and government authority is not without limits.

But government authority is a gift from God, a servant and avenger, for which God's people should demonstrate gratitude by living in subjection to it. It's a matter of genuine, law-fulfilling love.

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