

GOVERNMENTS AND AUTHORITIES

Sermon Transcript

Passage: Romans 13:1-7

MAIN IDEA

Christians joyfully subject themselves to authorities because they trust in the highest authority. *We have trouble subjecting ourselves to human authorities because have too large a view of what human authorities can do and too small a view of what God can do.*

1. Intro

- a. My name is Rob. For those of you who don't know me, I had the honor and privilege of serving as one of the pastors here at The Gathering for three years. In February, my wife Cass and I, along with our kids, moved to Raleigh to be a part of The Summit Church and to train as church planters.
- b. It's such a joy to be back here with you. Our whole family — our kids includes — think about you often. We remember you in our prayers. Just last week, Emma was praying and thanking God for each of your kids by name. So thank you for having us back.
- c. If you've been watching the news lately, there's a big event coming up this Tuesday. No, I'm not talking about National Cappuccino Day, though that is true... Tuesday is Election Day, and if you're like me, you have questions around this election in particular.
 - i. How should I vote?
 - ii. Should I even vote at all?
 - iii. When is Jesus going to come back?
- d. And these are all good questions, and I thought it appropriate to address some of the issues surrounding the election.
- e. But I'm not here this morning to tell you how to vote as a Christian on November 8.
 - i. There is a wealth of resources out there to help you evaluate the candidates from a Christian worldview.
- f. Instead, I want to focus our attention this morning on how to *live* as a Christian when you get up on November 9.
- g. So if you have a bible with you, turn in it to Romans 13.
- h. This morning, we're going to be talking about authority. Specifically, we're going to talk about everybody's favorite topic, *submitting to authority*. *Anybody just love submitting to authority? You're American. Of course you*

don't.

- i. Rebellion against authority is part of what it means to be an American. It's in our DNA.
 - j. But what I hope to show you this morning is God is glorified — and we are blessed — in how we submit authority.
 - k. Now, we need to lay a foundation before we dig in, because in order to believe and obey God's word in this area requires three things. So we're going to assume three things:
 - i. That we believe that God is our ultimate authority.
 - ii. That we believe that scripture is God's words.
 - iii. And that because God is our highest authority, his words have authority over our lives and we are morally obligated to obey them.
 - l. That's our starting point. And if you don't agree with those things, your pastors can help you work through those things. But that's our starting point and that's our foundation for tackling this issue.
 - m. So let's read together. Verse one.
2. **"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities."**
- a. You don't even need to wait until the end of the sermon to get your application this morning.
 - b. "Be *subject* to the governing authorities." Thus saith the Lord. And if it were that easy, I could close up my bible and go home.
 - c. But *living that out* is more complicated, and we're going to spend the rest of our time together unpacking what that looks like.
 - d. "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. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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, 4 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. 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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."
3. Alright, let's break that down.
- a. "Let *every person* be subject to the governing authorities."
 - b. In God's created order, he has ordained certain *institutions* that have authority over you and to which you are accountable. Now, "be subject to" doesn't mean "have blind *obedience* to" — which we'll talk about.
 - c. There are different authorities to which you are accountable. Authorities in

the home. Authorities in the workplace. But Paul is talking *primarily* about civil government in this passage.

- i. Here we have a *biblical command* to be subject to our civil government.
- d. Now, given current events, that raises a lot of questions. You may be thinking, “How can Paul say that?! Paul clearly didn't see the 2016 presidential election coming.”
- e. But Paul was writing to Christians in 1st century Rome and Rome, in a lot of ways, was a lot like the modern day United States.
 - i. Rome was an influential political center, led by a series of corrupt and unashamedly anti-Christian rulers.
 - ii. Compared to the rest of the world, Rome was affluent, but had a mixed social class, being made up of people ranging from slaves and the working class to the very wealthy.
 - iii. Rome's culture was marked by sensuality and immorality.
 - iv. And Rome was ethnically and religiously diverse. Everyone worshipped their own gods and tolerated the gods of others so long as you got along and didn't impose your beliefs on anyone else.
- f. When you look at it, Rome wasn't much different than the United States, with some key differences.
 - i. See, shortly before Paul wrote this letter, Jewish Christians had been banned from the city of Rome by Emperor Claudius for disrupting the social order with their refusal to worship pagan gods.
 - ii. A few years later, they were allowed to return by Emperor Nero, who tolerated Christians for some time, but soon began intensely persecuting them. And I don't mean that he asked them to bake a cake. I mean he threw them to the dogs, covered them in the equivalent of gasoline, and set them on fire to light his garden at night.
 - iii. Don't get me wrong — I'm nervous for the future of the American church and I believe that we are going to see a time in our generation where civil disobedience will be required, but what we are experiencing isn't remotely close to what believers in the first century were experiencing.
- g. So if believers in *Rome* could submit to the governing authorities of their day, believers in 21st-Century America to submit to the authorities of ours.
 - i. So what we need to discover, then, is what “being subject” looks like and *how* believers find the power to be subject to authority in a culture that is growing increasingly hostile toward Christians.
 - ii. Here's the answer that we find in this passage.

4. Christians joyfully subject themselves to authority because they trust in the highest authority.

- a. Christians submit to authority because they trust in the *highest* authority.

- b. **Part of the reason that we have trouble subjecting ourselves to human authorities because we have too big a view of what human authorities can do and too small a view of what our God can do.**
 - c. We forget who is in charge.
 - d. Notice that Paul doesn't focus on the atrocities of the Roman government here. He doesn't write blog posts about "Crooked Claudius" and "Nasty Nero." He focuses his attention on — and directs his readers' attention to — the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, who rules and reigns above all authorities on heaven and earth.
 - e. See, Paul knows that the power to submit to authority comes not through evoking fear of man, but through seeing God for who he is and putting civil authorities in their rightful place before him.
 - i. He tells us where authority comes from.
 - ii. He tells us what government is designed to do.
- 5. Christians joyfully subject themselves to authority because they trust God's sovereignty. Verses 1-3.**
- a. "For there is *no authority* except *from* God, and those that exist have been instituted *by* God."
 - b. All human authority is delegated by the one who has *ultimate* authority.
 - i. Jesus says in Matthew 28, "*All authority, on heaven and on earth, has been given to me.*"
 - ii. Congress wouldn't exist if God hadn't created it. The presidency wouldn't exist if God hadn't ordained it. Judges and state legislatures and magistrates wouldn't exist if God hadn't put them in place.
 - c. What's more God ordains not only the *institutions* of power but the very *people* who fill them and it is *from God* that they get their authority.
 - i. Dan 2:21 — "[God] changes times and seasons; [God] removes kings and sets up kings..."
 - ii. Prov 8:15-16 — "By [the Lord] kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by [the Lord] princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly."
 - iii. God alone puts rulers in positions of authority.
 - iv. And listen... that means that God isn't going to be surprised when the election is over on Tuesday night. He's not going to be looking down from heaven and shaking his head because we didn't get his man — or woman — into office. *He has already decided the outcome. He has already put them there!*
 - v. But how you respond on Wednesday morning — whether "your candidate" wins or loses — will reveal what you believe about God's sovereignty.
 - vi. Now, there are things that we are commanded to do, regardless. *Pray* for our leaders, 1 Tim 2. Show *honor* to our leaders, 1 Pe 2. But we do so *in light of* God's sovereignty over the nations, trusting his promises that *all things* work together for the good of those who *love*

God and are called according to his purpose.

- d. Now *if* all authority that exists is ordained by God himself, that means that *resisting* the authorities is *rebellious against* God himself.
 - i. It says as much in Verse 2 — “Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist *will* incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.”
 - 1. Like a friend of mine says, “This simply means that my daughter has never been grounded for making her bed. You have never been pulled over for going the speed limit. A police officer has never pulled you over, come to your window and said, ‘Is there some reason you’re not in a hurry tonight?’ That has never happened.”¹
 - ii. When you refuse to subject yourself to civil authority, you are refusing to subject yourself to God. And those who refuse to subject themselves to the governing authorities will be held accountable.
 - iii. Paul says in verse 4, “But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain,” verse 5, that he is “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”
 - iv. There are immediate and tangible consequences for refusing to submit to authority.
 - 1. If you refuse to obey the speed limit, you will get a ticket. If you refuse to pay the ticket, you will end up in jail. You can’t pull the “freedom in Christ” card. That’s not persecution. That’s getting what you deserve.
- e. So we submit to the government’s authority because we know that it has given by God.

6. Christians joyfully subject themselves to authority because they trust in God’s goodness. Verses 4-6.

- a. “[F]or 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. 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.”
- b. God ordains governments for the good of the people under their authority.
 - i. Now, I know. Not all governments do this, and we’re going to get there, I promise. But bear with me on this.
 - ii. God’s *design* for civil authorities is the flourishing of people under those authorities. *That includes Christians and non-Christians alike.* Governments are a means of God’s common grace for *all* people.

¹ Matt Chandler, “[Governments and Institutions](#).”

- iii. And Christians, specifically, because they are one with Christ in both his *exaltation* and his *suffering*, must sometimes sacrifice that which is in their self-interest for the good and flourishing of others.
- c. So that begs the question, what is "good?"
 - i. Because how you answer this question will affect both your *theology* and your *political position*.
 - ii. On one hand, as Christians, we know that the best possible thing for anyone, regardless of their situation, is to know Jesus.
 - iii. But on the other hand, there are people with real and tangible needs *now*. One-in-eight Americans doesn't have enough to eat. On any given night, more than half a million people experience homelessness. Between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders in the U.S. every year, 80% of whom are women and half of whom are children.
 - iv. On one hand, you don't walk up to a hungry child, give them a bible and say "Jesus loves you," and walk off, but on the other hand, as one pastor puts it, "Making people comfortable here for an eternity in hell is an ignorant, empty exercise."²
- d. So what is the role of government as it pertains to "doing good?"
 - i. This is where some Christians confuse the role of the government and the role of the Church.
 - ii. Some of my brothers and sisters on the political right would say that the government should be concerned primarily with preserving the moral fabric of our nation and that addressing social issues such as poverty and homelessness falls under the purview of the church and believers' personal responsibility.
 - iii. Some of my brothers and sisters on the political left would say that government has no business legislating morality and that the government should be primarily concerned with providing for the poor.
 - iv. I believe that both miss the mark. I believe that the answer lies not on either end of the spectrum but somewhere in what theologian Robertson McQuilken calls "the center of biblical tension."
 - v. That, if you study the whole of scripture, you will find a number of principles that hold the responsibility of secular governments and the responsibility of the church in tension.
 - vi. But rather putting in the hard work navigate that tension and develop a nuanced view of how the church and the government share responsibility — particularly in a secular culture — we pick one principle as an absolute and behave as if that is the *only* thing that scripture has to say about the issue. As McQuilkin says, "It seems

² Matt Chandler, "[Governments and Institutions](#)."

easier to go to a consistent extreme," he says, "than to stay at the center."³

- vii. I believe that both the government *and* the church have a responsibility to uphold moral values that are consistent with God's character, and I believe that both the government *and* the church have the responsibility to minister to the poor, the marginalized, and the disadvantaged.
- viii. Paul says so right here in this passage. Verse 6, "Because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing."
- ix. And this is just my personal opinion, and I lean conservative, particularly on moral issues, but I tend to agree with my politically liberal brothers and sisters who criticize the Republican platform when they say that conservatives tend to not do enough to create public policy that ministers to those in need.
- e. My pastor, Pastor J.D. Greear, says that there are 8 issues to consider every election,⁴ which you can read in detail on his blog, but I'll list a few here.
 - i. Protection of the innocent.
 - 1. This includes — but is not limited to — babies in their mothers' wombs. One valid criticism I hear from those who oppose the pro-life movement as it exists today is that "pro life" goes beyond the womb and extends to all people who are oppressed or disadvantaged, and that the pro-life movement needs to be more active as a matter of public policy to support mothers in crisis pregnancies and their children, both before and after delivery.
 - 2. Protection of the innocent also applies to the issues of racial injustice that we're experiencing as a nation. One area where the American church — particularly those believers who lean conservative — has failed is in the area of racial justice, mostly because in areas like Ashe County we are so far removed from our African-American brothers and sisters that we have no framework for how to respond.
 - 3. We need to seriously consider these things in our political engagement.
 - ii. Preservation of religious liberty. Issues regarding gender and sexuality are already impacting Christians' freedom to speak out against what we believe to be unrighteousness, and J.D. points out that this election will play a significant role in whether or not churches are allowed to keep their tax-exempt status.

³ Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible: Revised and Expanded*.

⁴ JD Greear, "[Why \(and How\) Christians Should Still Vote.](#)" See also [this panel discussion](#) from the Gospel and Politics Forum.

- iii. In addition, he lists the promotion of individual responsibility in providing for those in need, issues of liberty and justice for *all*, recognition of the divine order of marriage and sexuality, issues surrounding war, immigration versus integration, and issues of character.
- iv. If you want to read more about these issues, I'll post the transcript for this sermon on my blog and include a link in there.
- f. But we see here that the governing authorities are instruments of God's mercy.
 - i. I told you I wasn't going to tell you how to vote, but here's something to consider as you go to the polls on Tuesday...
 - ii. How do the candidates who you plan to vote for — in all offices — fit the description of authorities as ones appointed by God to be fair and just stewards of his mercy toward the marginalized and his wrath toward the wicked?
 - iii. As one of my brothers in Christ shared on his church's blog this week, "What political positions and actions (or inaction) will benefit my neighbor most, given the options God has made available?"⁵
 - iv. And look... I get it. The options don't look good. You might look at your ballot and think, "Nero looks like a pretty good choice right now."
 - v. But as you consider how to best love your neighbor with your vote, there are three options to consider.
 1. You can abstain. Some people will try to guilt you into voting. I agree with John Piper who said this weekend that "The right to vote in America is not a binding duty for Christians in every election." There are instances, particularly in matters of conscience, when abstaining is a legitimate option.
 2. If you do vote, you can vote for a third party. Again, you may be pressured to vote for a primary party candidate with the argument that "you're throwing away your vote," but I hold that as a matter of conscience for the Christian as well.
 3. Or vote for a primary party candidate based on the effect that you believe their policies may have on your neighbor.
 - vi. There are good arguments for all three of those options.
 - vii. And as difficult as it may be for you to understand — and trust me, I've had difficulty understanding — there are Christian brothers and sisters who have looked at the options and they have reached a different conclusion than you and they are going to cast a vote for a candidate who you vehemently oppose.
- g. So... All authorities are ordained by God, and they are ordained for the

⁵ From my brother Jeff Smith's article, "[How Should We Then Vote?](#)"

good of those who are subject to them.

7. From these two truths, we learn two things about God.

- a. And if you believe these two things about God, it will transform the way that you trust him in this area. Here they are.
 - i. God is *sovereign*.
 - ii. God is *good*.
- b. And this is precisely why Christians are commanded — not “asked,” *commanded* — to submit to civil authority.
- c. Christians joyfully subject themselves to authority *because* they trust in the *highest* authority.

8. Obviously, this raises some questions.

- a. What about evil rulers?
 - i. As theologian R.C. Sproul puts it, “When Paul says that the powers that be are ordained of God, he does not necessarily mean that the powers that be are approved of by God.”⁶
 - ii. God did not *approve* of the Roman government. God did not *approve* of the Holocaust. God did not *approve* of the reign of Stalin, or Mao, or any like them.
 - iii. But we do know that God uses wicked rulers to accomplish his purposes and that God, because he is *sovereign* and because he is *good*, allowed these events to take place for his glory among the nations. And we know that God is a *just* God and because he is just, he does not leave wickedness unpunished.
 - iv. *Because* they have been given authority *from* God, those in positions of authority are themselves accountable *to* God, and he promises in his word that wicked rulers will be judged.
 1. Is. 1:23 — “Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless and the widow’s cause does not come to them. *Therefore*, the Lord declares, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: “Ah, I *will* get relief from my enemies and *avenge* myself on my foes...”
 2. Is. 10:1 — “Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions.”
 3. 2 Co 5:10 — “For we must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done...”
 4. Church, a day is coming when all will be made right. Where perfect justice will once and for all be served. Where those who suffer at the hand of unjust rulers will be vindicated. Where the low will be exalted.

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *The Gospel of God: Romans*, chapter 5.

5. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven." — Mt 5:10
- v. Church, *Paul knew this!* Paul knew that there is something greater going on in our world. That the presidential election in America in 2016 is only a passing moment in time, that one day all of this will be forgotten, "There is no remembrance of former things; nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after." — Ecc 1:11
- vi. On that day when Jesus returns, all we will know is his goodness and grace and all of the wickedness of the world will pass away.
- b. The second question that I know is on your mind is, "When is civil disobedience justified?" When can we disobey the authorities?
 - i. Sproul, again, puts it this way: "Even if Christians find themselves in the unenviable position of being under the tyranny of an unrighteous and unjust government, they still have a *fundamental responsibility* to render civil obedience."⁷
 - ii. That's Paul's message here. But we need to acknowledge that there are exceptions.
 - iii. John Calvin has a short book called "Institutes of the Christian Religion," and in it, he describes something known as the "doctrine of the lesser magistrate" in which makes the argument that there are very rare situations in which a wicked ruler becomes so bad that the positions of authority flip and it becomes the people's responsibility to rise up and overthrow the ruler.
 1. That's not what we're talking about when we say "civil disobedience," alright? We *are* in Ashe County and I know some of you brothers are looking for an excuse to start an uprising, but now isn't the time.
 - iv. What we're talking about is *personal* expressions of civil disobedience, and there are situations in which civil disobedience is justified.
 - v. Civil disobedience is justified in one of two situations:
 1. Civil disobedience is justified when the governing authorities *prohibit* that which is *commanded* by God.
 2. Civil disobedience is justified when the governing authorities *command* that which is *prohibited* by God.
 - vi. And there are many biblical examples of believers who, in *specific* situations, refused to obey the authorities that were over them.
 - vii. Here are few:
 1. Acts 4 — Peter and John are healing people in the temple in the name of Jesus, and in doing so, they upset the structure

⁷ R.C. Sproul, *The Gospel of God: Romans*, chapter 5.

of power and control that the religious rulers maintained. And when the authorities command them to stop preaching the gospel, Peter and John said, Acts 4:19, "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."

2. Another example is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.⁸ Nebuchadnezzar had built an idol and commanded the people to bow to it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused, got tossed into a furnace, came out alive, and through their obedience to the Lord, Nebuchadnezzar ends up praising the Most High God.
 3. A couple more... The Egyptian midwives who refused to kill the male Hebrew children in Exodus 2, the wise men who refuse to report Jesus to Herod in Matthew 2...
 4. There are *scores* of examples of civil disobedience in the bible. Some of those, while righteous, have consequences at the hand of wicked rulers.
- viii. And I know that this brings up a lot of questions about specific situations.
1. What about the death penalty?
 2. What about war?
 3. What about taxpayer funding for abortion?
 4. And unfortunately, these questions don't always have clear cut answers. Believers need to, as Paul writes in chapter 12, "by testing... discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."
- ix. But listen... The baseline — the *baseline* — for the Christian life is *subjection to the governing authorities*.
1. We need to bend over backwards in our subjection to the governing authorities.
 2. In Letters from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King "explained that they tried to obey every law they could; and they disobeyed peaceably the ones that were egregiously unjust."⁹
 3. If *everything* becomes an excuse for civil disobedience for you, you're not in rebellion against civil authorities, you're in open rebellion against God and you need to repent.
- x. Civil disobedience has a limited scope and must be marked by submission *generally* and serious and thoughtful disobedience only

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa4QSweFQYE>

⁹ J.D. Greear, "[The Mysterious Witness of Submission and Suffering.](#)"

when you can no longer obey without sinning.

9. Christians joyfully subject themselves to authorities because they trust the highest authority.

- a. Where do you need to subject yourself to the authority that God has ordained for you?
- b. Where, as Paul writes in verse 7, do you need to pay “respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”
- c. See, these aren’t simple checklists where you can change a couple of habits and be right with this passage.
- d. We have in us a spirit of rebellion that goes deep down to the idols of our hearts. As I shared with you at the beginning of our time this morning, we have trouble subjecting ourselves to human authorities because we have too large a view of what human authorities can do and too small a view of what God can do.
- e. The only way — the *only* way — that we can be obedient to God’s word in the area of submission to authority is if we view civil governments in their rightful place underneath God’s sovereign authority.

10. Conclusion

- a. No matter what happens on November 8, I know that on November 9, I am commanded to joyfully subject myself to the authorities the God has ordained because *he* is good, *he* is in control.
- b. No matter who sits in oval office, I know who sits on a throne, ruling and reigning in power and authority over all the earth.
- c. My hope is not in human kings but in a heavenly King.
- d. I trust not in a “higher” power, but in the *highest* power.
 - i. The name above all names.
 - ii. The King of Kings.
 - iii. The Lord of Lords.
 - iv. The firstborn of all creation.
 - v. The Alpha and the Omega.
 - vi. The Beginning and the End.
 - vii. Who was and is and is to come.
- e. The one to whom all authority has been given.
 - i. To whom *every* knee shall bow and *every* tongue — all rulers, in every nation, in all ages — *every* tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.
 - ii. He loves you. He cares for you. His hand is upon you.
 - iii. Church, be encouraged this morning.