

**Submission to Governing Authorities:  
What, Why, and How  
Romans 13:1-7**

This main point of this text is clear: **submit to the governing authorities!**

Sounds exciting doesn't it? Especially in the days we find ourselves in?

- How many of you woke up and said, "I would like some bacon, coffee, and a sermon on submitting to the civil authorities?"
- I took Kimberly to D.C. this week for her birthday. I saw all kinds of illustrations for people's lack of respect for those in office -- only I can't share any of them here!

Not only do some people hate the idea of submitting to the authorities, **but bucking authorities is viewed as a virtue** to some people in our culture.

*Why is civil obedience & respecting officials so disliked?*

**Because we're sons and daughters of Adam!**

- Rebelling against authority is as old as the garden.
- We want to do our own thing - that's not just a Texas thing!
- That's a human nature thing!
- We don't even want God to tell us what to do! "Who said?" "God?" "Did God really say?"

**Because we (at least most of us in the room) are Americans!**

- Just ask the British how we feel about authority!
- "We don't want your King or your Tea!"
- "Don't tread on me!" is part of the American ethos.
- (I always enjoy wishing my British friend Steve Timmis "Happy Independence Day" on July 4th. He always has a witty comeback).
- **We came into being by rebelling, and we tend to think positively about it.**

**Because free speech tends to foster rebellion against authority**

- Free speech is a wonderful freedom, but **some use this freedom to talk about leaders as if they're all total buffoons.**
- Trashing the authorities is a source of entertainment.
- It's how many talk radio hosts and entertainers make a living!
- **That kind of thing doesn't happen in many other countries -- imagine the Romans doing this with Nero!**

**Because we have all had bad experiences with those in authority.**

- Who among us has not suffered from bad experiences, even traumatic experiences, with parental authority, authorities at school, teachers, coaches, the police, or some other form of authority?
- Many live with those wounds, and such experiences are in our mind when we read passages like this.

So this is a very unpopular passage, given these reasons, and **the dislike is only intensified in the current political climate.**

We must remember that Paul was **NOT** writing in a perfect political climate.

- **Nero** was reigning!
- Nero was more sane early on, but grew progressively more maniacal.
- **He murdered his own mother**, the same crazy mother who helped him get to the throne, and of course Nero put many Christians to death.
- But Paul still wrote Romans 13!

The fact is, this is God's Word. **All of God's Word is profitable for shaping us into the image of Jesus. God's Word is more important than any other word.**

**It doesn't answer all our questions.** It's not a treatise on government. **It's only 7 verses!** But it gives us some general truths that are important, particularly how God has instituted the governing authorities for our good, & how we should relate to the government.

**What is this passage even doing here?**

If you're reading through Romans for the first time, you may get to chapter 13, and say, what is this doing here? Some think it was added later. But I don't buy it.

**1. It continues the flow of thought from 12:17-21.**

- One reason **we can allow God to judge because God has appointed government as the institution to carry out judgment.**
- The previous passage also mentions: "doing what is honorable in the sight of all," "living peaceably with everyone" and "doing good."
- So we could read these two passages together.

**2. The Roman Context.**

He is writing to Christians in the epicenter of Roman rule! That's hard to ignore.

More precisely, Paul needed to emphasize **the need to avoid political extremism.**

- Paul corrects 2 extremes: **over-realized eschatology**, that is, "the kingdom is here, so ignore Caesar," and **under-realized eschatology**, that is, "Kingdom is not here, so pick up your sword against Caesar and let's bring the kingdom here!"
- Paul is trying to avoid the "ignore Caesar" or "fight Caesar" positions.
- Bird: "Paul might be saying something like, 'Jesus is Lord, the new age has dawned, but be that as it may, we cannot get ahead of ourselves and live as if authorities are not there. They are here, and for good reasons; God has appointed them to provide justice for their peoples. What is more, some hot-heads in Judea might be sharpening their swords for holy war, looking for opportunities to revolt, but that will not solve the problem; instead, it will replace imperial rule with lawless anarchy. God can bring Rome to his knees, and he doesn't need your sword to do it.'"
- Paul may have also wanted the Romans to know that he was coming to Rome as a **missionary apostle, not a political agitator.**

- He may have had a specific issue in mind relating to taxes.
  - Jews historically had a hard time paying taxes to the “**heathen authorities.**”
  - Tacitus also tells us of a growing discontentment w the power of government in the first century, and that there **was a tax revolt AD 58** (Paul wrote Romans 55-58).
  - **Further**, some claim that some of the Jews who were previously expelled from Rome, and then re-entered, after the riot over “Chrestus” **may have taken a strong zealot position on taxes**, claiming there’s no king but God, and one should not pay taxes to anyone but God, and so Paul needed to dissuade them from taking part in a revolution.

### **3. To combat extreme views on what it means to “not be conformed to the world.”**

Christians throughout our history have struggled to understand **how to relate to culture.**

- Some want to reject “the earthiness of this life” for a “higher more richer” spiritual life that is disconnected from the world.

Paul corrects these views throughout his writings:

- Christians at times adopted crazy spiritual views in Paul’s day. He had to correct their erroneous views on sex (1 Cor 7), marriage (see 1 Cor 7, and 1 Tim 4:3), foods/drink (1 Tim 4:3), going to work (2 Thess 3), and government (Ti 3:1). They wanted to reject these things in the name of being “spiritual” not worldly.
- Not being conformed to the mindset of the world doesn’t mean you that you should avoid marriage, that you shouldn’t have sex in your marriage, that you must reject foods/drink that God has created for our enjoyment, that you should just stop going to work and wait for the second coming, or that we should overthrow the government!
- Rather, it’s that you view all of these **in light of a biblical worldview.**

But we live the Christian life right here in the real world.

- **We pay taxes.**
- **We change diapers. Some of you could be world record holders!**
- **We work jobs. We buy groceries.**
- **We make breakfast.**
- **We get headaches, backaches, and have heartaches in relationships.**

**And we have to learn how to live as God’s people in a pagan world -- a world ran by many unqualified and incompetent world leaders.**

- We always have.
- The church continues to march on because there is no government where the gospel doesn’t work.
- The gospel has worked in a monarchy, democracy, republic, an oligarchy, dictatorship, etc.

**There are no closed countries to Jesus!**

- **The Holy Spirit isn’t worried saying, “Oh, what about the Muslims!”**
- Please. “God is working salvation in the midst of the earth!” (Ps 74:12)
- And no human leader can thwart His sovereign purposes.

- **The gospel exploded in the Greco Roman world** -- a world led by maniacs!
- **And the gospel is growing today in some very unlikely places!**

So how then do citizens of heaven live as citizens on earth?

How do those “in Christ” and those “in Rome” and “in Raleigh” live faithful Christian lives?

### #1: What? (13:1a)

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities”

“**Every person**” (lit, “every soul”)– **This is a universal demand.**

- Paul is not making a distinction between Christian/Non-Christian.
- Paul is not making a distinction between Christian/Non-Christian rulers either.
- Everyone is called to submit to governing authorities.

“**Authorities**” –**Any person that represents the authority of the state:** from local bureaucrats all the way up (Prime Minister, President, Emperor)

“**Subject**” (submit (CSB), *hypostasso*) – It’s broader than “obey.” It conveys the idea of standing under the government in recognition that **this is how God has ordered the world.** The authorities exist under the authority of God.

This is **not an isolated reference** to submitting to the authorities here.

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

**1 Tim 2:1-3** – pray for them

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

“**For the Lord’s sake**” - **We are to obey the civil authorities ultimately out of reverence for and submission to the Lord.** (That’s why we practice the other forms of honor and submission also -- unto the Lord)

- Schreiner: “**We have an implication here that the ruling powers should be resisted if commands were issued that violated the Lord’s will.** It is impossible to imagine that one would obey commands that [broke] God’s [commands] “for the Lord’s sake.”
- **We are to submit to these authorities for the Lord’s sake.**

**Government is one expression of God’s common grace; it is here for our good.**

- **It is designed to provide justice, order and civility.**
- **It is like the gift of marriage, and family, given to preserve and enrich humanity.**

## Objections:

This passage is troubling verse to people, for a number of reasons. I'll mention two.

### 1. Some argue that Paul's sweeping, unqualified demand to submit to governing authorities justifies the actions of evil rulers and demands obedience to such rulers at all times.

- But the NT clearly teaches that we must ultimately “obey God rather than men” (**Acts 5:29**).
- The reference in 1 Pet 2 also points to the ultimate authority, “for the Lord’s sake.”
- We are to engage in “civil disobedience” when the government prohibits us from doing what the Lord commands, or when it commands us to do what the Lord prohibits.
- This is implicit in every exhortation to “submit.”
- Throughout Scripture we have various ways in which we are to submit – “one another,” (Eph 5:21), children to parents (Luke 2:51), servants (Col 3:22); God’s law (Rom 8:7); in marriage (Eph 5); the church to Christ (Eph 5:24); to God (James 4:7), and to the elders/overseers (1 Pet 5:5)
- The parallel to **marriage** is helpful.
- A wife is to recognize God’s design for marriage, like we recognize God’s design for government. The husband is the leader, the guide.
  - **But that doesn’t mean the wife is to do whatever the guy demands!**
  - If he is promoting sin, is leading her into sin, or is abusing his wife, and not caring for her, than she should not follow him. **She should not submit to Him.** That’s not God’s design. (If you are a lady, I pray you never experience such abuse)
- In the same way, **there will be times in which we cannot submit to the authorities.** Sometimes the grievousness of a demand, and the extent of it, requires civil disobedience.
- With that said, Paul is **not** dealing with exceptions in this passage.
- He doesn’t address when it is right to rebel against unjust rulers.
- His concern is with authority and order.

### 2. Some argue that Paul was naïve.

“He should avoid politics and stick to propitiation.”

But Paul is drawing **on personal history** and **redemptive history** (the Bible).

He wasn’t naïve about the government’s role and its relationship to God.

#### A. Paul had a somewhat **mixed experience** with Roman authorities.

- At times he was protected and helped by Roman officials (Acts 16; Acts 18:12-17; 21:39; 22:23-29; 25:10-11)
- His bold, gospel speeches show **respect** and **thoughtfulness**.
- And he knew that the state could be **unjust**.
- He knew this from the life of Jesus; **unjust rulers crucified our Lord** (Acts 4:24-28).
- Further, **Paul** himself **experienced** various **afflictions** and **imprisonments** in the Roman Empire (2 Cor. 11:23).
- What is more, Paul himself had been an unjust leader prior to his conversion.

- Paul clearly knew that rulers could be unjust, and at the time of writing, Nero is in charge.

## B. Paul knew **redemptive history!**

- The Bible clearly teaches that **God is sovereign over the authorities.**
  - “He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings” (Dan 2:21). See also Psalm 75:7; Isaiah 40:23-24; Isa 45:1-7
  - [Jesus told Pilate]: “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” (Jn 19:11)]
- Paul’s heritage also taught him that evil rulers must be **resisted** at times.
  - In **Daniel 3:12-18** we have examples of like the three Hebrew boys being thrown in the fire for not bowing down to an idol. (Also Daniel 6:6-10 - he bowed down to God and ignored the King’s decree and was thrown to lions as a result)
  - **Ex 1:17, 21**: “Hebrew midwives feared God and did not do what the King commanded.” And they were commended.
  - **Hebrews 11:23**, Moses’ parents’ hid him because “they were not afraid of the king’s edict” (11:23). They are commended and rewarded.
  - Paul was certainly aware of such examples and yet he still penned these words about submitting to the governing authorities.

So Paul knows what he’s talking about....

## #2: Why? (13:1b-5)

Why must we submit to the authorities?... I’ve alluded to the first reason...

### 1. God has instituted governing authorities (1b-2)

- The text couldn’t be clearer. There is no authority except from God.
- The second phrase is stronger, “those that exist have been instituted by God” – that is ordained by God.
- God’s sovereignty over the government is not a new idea; it’s expressed in various places in Scripture.
- All authorities are instituted by the God who governs the world.
- God sets up kings and removes them.
- **Jeroboam** was one of the most wicked kings of Israel. In 1 Kings 12:15, the writer says this about him taking the throne: “It was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord.”
- Piper: “This means that the Roman Christians and we today should learn that it is God’s will to govern the world of mankind through human civil authorities. This is God’s plan. Man did not create government. God did. Man does not sustain it. God does. Civil authority is God’s idea in this age.”
- Sometimes God gives authorities **as a blessing to a people**, and sometimes he institutes them as a means of **trial or judgment**. **God has His own purposes.**

## App

Many Christians can’t see past the earthly government, to the government of God.

- They don’t trust in the providence of God.



- Many conservative Christians lose their minds when it comes to politics.
- They fail to see the God who is over the government.
- Engage in the process? Yes, of course. Speak truth to power? Yes, when possible. But freak out or make an idol of out a party or a system? No way.
- Don't live your life in a horizontal way.
- Look vertically to the God who governs all things, bowing before his providence.

So Paul points out that the authorities are working out some of the purposes of God...  
**V 2:** Consequently, if we rebel against the authorities, we are rebelling against God's order, and judgment will result (ie., both by rulers, and God's judgment at the end of history, v. 5).

## 2. The authorities act as "God's servants," punishing evil and rewarding good (3-4)

- Many leaders think they are "God!" - but they are "servants of God."
- Paul dignifies the office, but also puts the leader under God.
- Usually "servant" (*diakonos*) refers to someone ministering consciously on God's behalf; but occasionally it denotes a public official (Est 1:10; Jer 25:9).
- Many of them unconsciously serve the purposes of God in the world (Moo).
- Paul is describing how the officials are supposed to rule!
- He's aware of exceptions, but doesn't mention them here.

**V 4b:** They have the right to punish wrongdoers. They don't bear the sword in vain.

- The government is armed and can use force (Moo).
- They have punitive capacity under God.
- "The judgment of the state against evildoers in history anticipates the eschatological judgment of God at the end of history." (Schreiner)

**V 4a:** He is God's servant for your "good."

This is what our officials should be doing; promoting that which leads to human flourishing.

**1 Timothy 2:1-4:** "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. <sup>3</sup>This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

**V 3:** If believers want to be free from fear of the authorities, then they should be people who do "good."

- Again, this is the way it is supposed to work.
- We are all aware of horrific events in which authorities have abused their power and punished or killed innocent civilians.
- But when it comes to citizens and authorities, both are to serve the common good.

Often Christians complain about the state of things, but spend no time trying to bless their towns, cities, and nation.

- It's just all talk.

Jeremiah's word to Israelites living in Babylon is very instructive for Xians. They were to serve the king of Babylon and work for the welfare of the city.

### Jeremiah 29:4-7

<sup>4</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

- You catch all that? **Live in the city for the good of the city. Seek the welfare of the land, and pray to the Lord for the people.**
- Let's not be the one's complaining about government **if we are doing nothing to promote the welfare of our Babylon.**
- **We are right to speak out against abortion, but we must also be prepared to love and welcome and promote the welfare of children and families.**
- **Before complaining about leaders, pray for them.**
  - Those who get all enraged about the state of things, but never pray or get involved in doing good, **are not following this model.**
  - They **are taking up carnal weapons.**
- Paul didn't say, "Go fight Nero back" but "Go do good."

My friend Harvey told me a story about his church a few weeks ago. They have done a lot of service in the city of Reno, and have built a reputation for being a Bible preaching church, but also a church that loves the city. "In the city for the City" is the tagline. Well, Harvey was preaching a series on sexuality, and you can imagine some didn't like it. In fact, a lady who is the leader of activist group, found the sermons online and started a crusade against his church. When the church was about to do their art-walk, which is an event they do with local businesses in the city, this lady personally started visiting the business owners telling them what Harvey said in his sermons (which was basically historic Christianity). But only a few businesses listened. In fact, one lady, who is a bi-sexual, tattoo and piercing artist came to Harvey and said, "I know what you believe, and you know I disagree, but you guys have done so much for our city and our schools, that I'm not turning my back on you." Then she went to advocated for them to the other businesses.... In the end, this movement against him got no traction because the church had such a reputation for blessing the city." That's a wonderful example of a church doing good in the city...

### V 5: Summary of the argument (5)

"avoiding God's wrath," that is, we know that it is ultimately God who ordains the authorities and will bring final judgment.



**“for the sake of conscious,” that is, our inner moral compass tells us it is right!**

- We don't just want to avoid punishment – **we want to please God!**
- We see **beyond the government to the God behind it.**
- We are conscious of the fact that God has ordained the authorities, and we must then submit to them – because in submitting to them, we are submitting to God.
- And what is against conscience cannot be done. (Acts 5:29)
- Moo: **“Conscience at one and the same time obliges us to be obedient and sets a limit to that obedience.”**

### **#3: How? (13:6-7)**

**“For”** – Linking the previous section, here are **two ways to keep a good conscious and submit to the authorities.**

#### **1. We pay taxes (6-7a).**

- Nero's taxes were highly unpopular but Paul says Christians shouldn't get tangled up in the backlash against them. (Bird)
- In case we missed it already, Paul reminds us, **“they are God's servants.”**
- The word is actually different this time (*leitourgos*) it's a word for the people who served in the temple and in the NT “ministers of the Lord” (eg., Rom 15:16). (Moo)
- It's very strong language. Civic leaders are serving God's purposes.

**7a** – **generally**: “give to all what is owed”; **specifically**, “taxes to who taxes are owed”

- **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”** (Mark 12:17)
- Jesus legitimized government, and put it in proper perspective.
- **It's not ultimate.**
- Many Christians seem to think politics is more important than the kingdom of God, given how animated they get in talking about political issues! But it's not ultimate.
- **Give your coin to Caesar. Give to God what He deserves.**
- **The coin bears Caesar's image, give it to Him.**
- **You bear God's image, give your life to him.**
- Don't lose your witness by cheating on taxes; but adorn the gospel by being a good citizen, paying your taxes.

#### **2. We honor leaders (7b)**

- Find this hard? I do. **Personally, I'm sickened by the shameful and embarrassing state of American politics. Is this the best we can do in this great land?**
- **What are we to do?** Well, some of you need to run for office! Get involved!
- And all of us must live honorably, not sinking to the same shameful state.
- We should respect the office, **even when you disagree with and dislike the leaders.**
- Honor them, **for the Lord's sake.**
- Paul preached the gospel to Felix & Agrippa, but **he respected them as a leader.** (Acts 24-26)
- We should have a respectful attitude to leaders, not because the world esteems them or we like their policies, but because they are fulfilling God's design.

- And practically, in Rome, the way to stay under the radar as a marginalized group (which Christians were) was to live honorably, not rebelliously.

### **Applications (Bringing this all together)**

#### **1. Acknowledge God's design for civil authorities, and thank God for all the good that is done through them.**

- While there are many shameful incidents involving the abuse of power, the design of government is for our good. Among many things, authorities restrain evil.
- Can you imagine if 911 never answered?
- What if we had no police? No fireman. No military? Just gangs?
- Abuse and violence would be everywhere.
- About 4 Billion of the world's poor live outside the rule of law (IJM via UN).
- When you visit such places, you will probably see things a bit differently.
- We should be thankful when our officials are serving the common good.
- And we should see God's design behind it all.

#### **2. Pray for those in leadership.**

If you find this text difficult to do in the current political world, I feel the same way.

- Perhaps when you find yourself wrestling with this admonition, we should take that as a call to prayer.
- Paul tells us to pray for our leaders; that's one way to honor them.
- This is the real weapon: Prayer.
- Don't be the kind of Christian that spends more time criticizing than interceding.

#### **3. Be a good citizen.**

- Pay taxes.
- Obey the law.
- Be respectful.
- We have even more reason: we do these things unto the Lord.
- Pour yourself out for the needy.
- Live with a clear conscious before God.
- Serve the city and your country for the common good.
- Engage the political process with truth and justice and the common good in mind.

##### **Proverbs for (civil leaders):**

- Prov. 8:15: Kings (should) reign by wisdom and make laws that are just.
- Prov. 16:10: Kings should not speak unjustly.
- Prov. 16:12: Kings should be righteous and detest wrongdoing.
- Prov. 29:4: king's justice brings stability to a country.
- Prov 31:8-9: King's speak up for those with no influence
- **Bring your convictions into the public arena**
  - "Righteousness exalts a nation" Prov 14:34

#### **4. Rest in the Providence of God.**

- Calm down. God is sovereign.

- Many sometimes talk like the church will collapse because this guy or this gal is or could be in the White House.
- Really?
- **“Our nation is an experiment; the church is a certainty” (Dever)**
- The Gates of hell won’t prevail against it.
- **The church is growing throughout the world in places with oppressive governments.**
- In all cases, we can rest in God’s care.
- No matter the circumstances, our testimony is “Our God reigns.”
- “The Lord reigns, let the people tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cheribum, let the earth quake”

### **5. Make your ultimate allegiance to King Jesus.**

**Akin: “So, as a devoted follower of Jesus, I will say “yes” to obeying the government and paying taxes to Caesar, but I will say “no” to disobeying the Word of God and worshiping a man or institution. Independence Day for the Christian is not marked by a flag. No, our independence day is Easter, marked by a cross and an empty tomb.”**

**Soon, Jesus will establish a one-party kingdom, which He will rule with perfect peace of justice forever. The lion and lamb will play together.**

- Paul was clearly aware that soon Jesus’ Kingdom would take over Rome and every other kingdom.
- Soon, Nero would put Paul to death.
- **But today people name their dogs after Nero, but the sons after Paul. They name churches, schools, hospitals, etc.**
- **Kings and kingdoms fade away, but the Kingdom of Christ endures forever.**
- We must live our lives as exemplary citizens, but ultimate allegiance to the King.
- Our hope is not in the kingdoms of this world, but the Kingdom of our Christ.

You may have no real problem with paying your taxes, and obeying our laws; you may be a very respectful citizen, **but have you acknowledged Jesus’ authority?**

- There are many fine American citizens who have not bowed the knee to King Jesus, and that’s a tragedy.
- Are you a citizen of heaven?

We were recently having dinner with some folks from here at IDC, who had completed their citizenship. There was a sign as you come in the house, to a particular member of the family, “Congrats on becoming a citizen!”

With that citizenship comes a particular security and identity.

**My friends, I love being an American citizen, but there is no security and no identity like being an a citizen of heaven.**

- **And there’s no rigorous process for you to enter in!!!**
- You need to admit that your a broken sinner in need of grace;
- You need to repent and believe in this One who bore our sins in his body on the tree that we may be righteous.

- To be a citizen of heaven, **all you need is *need***.
- You're invited you in.
- Jesus makes outsiders ... insiders, by his matchless grace.
- Jesus Christ -- the King who has all authority in heaven and on earth.
- Jesus Christ -- the King *who is completely trustworthy*.
- Bow before him in glad submission, and be part of the kingdom of God.

20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Amen. Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus.

We long for you to come and set up your unending, perfectly-ruled kingdom.

Let us give honor where it is due -- and Jesus Christ is due all honor and glory, forever.  
Amen.