

Believers Are to be Subject to Governing Authorities

Romans 13:1-7

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

Background Notes

Romans 12-16 is the “practical application” section of the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Romans 12 we are exhorted to present our bodies as living sacrifices in service to our Lord Jesus. Furthermore, we are told how to relate to fellow believers in the Church and how to relate to unbelievers in society.

In Romans 13 we learn that believers are to be subject to the governing authorities. As most of you know, when the apostle Paul wrote these words the power in Rome was not a Christian government. In fact, it was a **pagan** government, and the Roman emperor was Nero! It was under Nero that Paul was martyred for being a Christian. And yet, even with Nero on the throne, Paul was inspired to write these words, *“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities...”*

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers must submit to governing authorities.

Why must believers obey the governing authorities? At least two good reasons are given here.

Reason 1: **The governing authorities are ordained by God.** *“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God...” (v1-2).* All authority finds its source in God, and God has chosen to channel His authority down to us, to mankind, in four different lines of authority. The first three are: the line of authority in the home, the line of authority in the Church, and the line of authority in the area of labor. The fourth is the line of civil authority or governmental authority. It’s the fourth line of authority that we have here in Romans 13.

What is our responsibility to and in these lines of authority? **Submit!** Even when we don't like what the authority demands, we submit! Does anyone like to pay taxes? Think of the illustration of Mary and Joseph, traveling more than seventy-five miles over rough roads late in Mary's pregnancy -- to be registered for the purpose of **taxation!** Do you remember what our Lord Jesus said in Matthew 22, when He was asked about paying taxes, *"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* And here in Romans 13:7, *"Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor."*

The phrase *"honor to whom honor"* (v7) doesn't mean that we approve of wrong-doing in government officials, but we respect the office because we recognize that it's an authority structure that is ordained by God. When I was in the military we used to say, "You salute the office, not necessarily the officer." You honor the line of authority. We submit, even when we disagree with the authority and think that the authority or a law is wrong. That includes building codes, government red tape to set up a business or to set up a ministry, and even speed limits!

Some time ago a Christian man told me that he didn't obey the speed limit because he disagreed with it -- and not only that, his car ran more efficiently at a higher speed, so he was conserving what the Lord had given him! Can you believe it? Where do you find that in the Bible?

The only times we disobey governing authorities is when they command us to do something that God condemns, or they refuse to let us do something that God commands. At that point we follow the principle of Acts 5:29: *"We ought to obey God rather than men."* That is, we obey God, who is the higher authority. But we don't revolt and shoot the police who come to arrest us for disobeying those laws. Even here we are to be subject to the governing authorities.

If we disagree with the "powers that be," we may write to them or protest or vote them out of office. In fact, the Church should function as the conscience of the state! Do you remember that John the Baptist rebuked Herod? He rebuked Herod for his sinful lifestyle, but at the same time, he submitted -- even to the point of death. 1 Peter 2:13-14 tells us, *"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good."*

Reason #2. **The governing authorities are the servants of God.** Look at verses 3-4: *"For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."* And verse 6: *"For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing."*

How are government officials the servants of God? The idea here, of course, is not that all police personnel, tax collectors, or government officials are Christians -- but they're used by God to restrain evil and give structure to society. Verses 4-5 show us that God can use the governing authorities to discipline us. *"But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵ Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake."*

If we disobey the governing authorities, the penalty we pay is from God, because government is a line of authority that God has set up. The source is **God!** So if you get a speeding ticket, remember that it's not just given to you by the state trooper, it's coming from God! You don't necessarily have to thank the state trooper for being such a willing servant of the Lord, but I think you recognize what we're dealing with here in this line of authority. Aside from getting caught, we should obey for conscience sake: *"Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake" (v5).* Do you have a good conscience in this area? Believers must submit to governing authorities.

2. Capital punishment has a biblical basis.

"But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain..." (v4). The "sword" mentioned here is not just a symbol of the state -- it is the God-given right of the government to maintain law and order, even to the point of imposing the death penalty. "But wait a minute," you say. I thought that the Bible said, "You shall not kill" in Exodus 20:13!" Yes, the Bible does say that, but the word for "evil" that's used in the verse, *"But if you do evil, be afraid"* refers to murder, not capital punishment.

But what about the argument that capital punishment was imposed as part of the Mosaic Law in the Old Testament, and the Mosaic Law ended with the coming of Christ? Doesn't that fact do away with the biblical basis for capital punishment today? No -- for two reasons!

Reason #1: **The biblical basis for capital punishment precedes the Law.** Genesis 9:6 gives us the biblical basis for capital punishment. *"Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man."*

Genesis 9:6 is part of the Noahic covenant that God made with man after the Flood -- **before** the Law of Moses. The Noahic covenant was made for all of mankind, and it is still in effect today. If you make the Mosaic Covenant the basis for capital punishment, you have a problem. Under the Mosaic Law the death penalty was imposed not only for murder, but also for adultery, homosexuality, witchcraft and even for a rebellious teenager. All these things are still sin, but we believe that governing authorities no longer have a biblical basis for imposing capital punishment for these sins, since we are no longer under the Mosaic Law. But murder is different, because the biblical basis for capital punishment goes all the way back to God's covenant with mankind in Genesis 9:6 -- and **God has never been rescinded or lifted** this covenant.

Reason #2: **The biblical basis for capital punishment is affirmed in Romans 13:4.** *"But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."* Here the New Testament affirms that there's still a biblical basis for capital punishment. And capital punishment does not mean that God has a "low" view of life -- in fact, God has a very "high" view of life! Men and women were created in the image of God, so human life is sacred and precious! God's view of life is so high, because man is created in the image of God, that if you dare to take a life, you forfeit your own life. Capital punishment has a biblical basis.

Practical Application

Let's not fall into the "separation of Church and state" trap.

As Christians, we recognize that there is a separation between church and state because they are two different lines of authority. But don't fall into the "separation of **God** and the state," as the liberal mindset does, and as atheist activists and misguided news media would have us do. They would like to separate God, the Bible, and all moral matters from the decisions of state. They would say, for example, that the state cannot make laws against abortion because of the separation between the church and the state. Watch out for that trap! Separation between Church and state -- yes. But **separation between God and state – No!**

Both Church and State answer to **God!** Both are lines of authority coming down from God Himself. Let's not be misguided and fall into the "separation of Church and state" trap.