

## **Christians and Submitting to Government**

Scripture: Romans 13

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**Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities.** (13:1 a)

The basic command is simple and succinct: **Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities.** In the broadest sense, **every person** applies to every human being, because the principle stated here reflects God's universal plan for mankind. But Paul is speaking specifically to Christians, declaring, in effect, that Christianity and good citizenship should go together. And, as he will continue to explain, **subjection to the governing authorities** includes much more than simply obeying civil laws. It also includes genuine honor and respect for government officials as God's agents for maintaining order and justice in human society.

Because the apostle was writing to the church in Rome, the capital of the empire, some interpreters suggest that he was giving a unique warning to Christians there because of the greater danger to traitors and insurrectionists, real or imagined. Most people did not enjoy the legal protection of presumed innocence, especially in regard to crimes against the state. Long considered a sect of Judaism, with its rebellious inclinations, the church was especially suspect.

But Paul's arguments here, as well as similar teachings elsewhere in the New Testament, make clear that the principle of subjection to human authority applies to every believer, in whatever part of the world and under whatever form of government. Writing to believers who were "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1), Peter said, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king" (1 Pet. 2:13–17).

As always, Paul followed his own instruction. After being falsely accused of breaking Roman law, he and Silas were brutally beaten, thrown in prison, and placed in stocks in Philippi. But instead of railing out against the ones who had mistreated them and demanding their rights from the authorities, they spent the first night in jail (until the Lord miraculously delivered them) "praying and singing hymns of

praise to God” (Acts 16:25).

Georgi Vins is a Russian pastor who, for many years before the fall of Soviet communism, suffered, along with many others, great persecution for his faith. Yet he recounts that, however severe their repression and mistreatment became, pastors and other Christians determined to obey every law, just or unjust, with the exception of laws that would force them to cease worship or to disobey God’s Word. Following Peter’s admonition, they willingly suffered “for doing what is right,” but not “for doing what is wrong” (1 Pet. 3:17). They would not “suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler,” but would gladly suffer “as a Christian” (4:15–16).

Believers are to be model citizens, known as law abiding not rabble-rousing, obedient rather than rebellious, respectful of government rather than demeaning of it. We must speak against sin, against injustice, against immorality and ungodliness with fearless dedication, but we must do it within the framework of civil law and with respect for civil authorities. We are to be a godly society, doing good and living peaceably within an ungodly society, manifesting our transformed lives so that the saving power of God is seen clearly.

In his significant book *Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government*, Robert D. Culver writes,

Churchmen whose Christian activism has taken mainly to placarding, marching, protesting, and shouting might well observe the author of these verses [Rom. 13:1–7] and then they might observe him first at prayer, then in counsel with his friends, and, *after that*, preaching in the homes and marketplaces. When Paul came to be heard by the mighty, it was to defend his action as a preacher (albeit in the streets) of [the] way to heaven. ([Chicago: Moody Press, 1975], p. 262, emphasis in original)

**Be in subjection** translates *hupotasso*, which was often used as a military term referring to soldiers who were ranked under and subject to the absolute authority of a superior officer. The verb here is a passive imperative, meaning first of all that the principle is a command, not an option, and second that the Christian is to willingly place himself under all **governing authorities**, whoever they may be.

Paul gives no qualification or condition. Every civil authority is to be submitted to willingly. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul teaches “that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:1–2), again with no exception related to the rulers’

competence or incompetence, morality or immorality, cruelty or kindness, or even godliness or ungodliness. He gives the same instruction in his letter to Titus, to whom he wrote, “Remind them [believers under his care] to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men” (Titus 3:1–2). He admonished the Thessalonian Christians “to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need” (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

During the first several centuries of the church, many Christians were so little involved with the societies in which they lived that sometimes they were considered outsiders in their own communities. They were not unloving, uncaring, or insensitive to others, but they lived very distinct and separated lives. And although they were not pacifists or opposed to civil government, few Christians enlisted in military service or sought government office. The third-century Christian writer Tertullian commented that, under the pagan Roman Empire, Christians were not executed for inflammatory teaching or behavior but for presumed antisocial tendencies. Even though that view was biased, it nevertheless reflected the church’s focus on the kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of man. Sadly, that focus does not characterize most of the church today. Even spiritual and moral battles are often fought by worldly, materialistic means. Many of the “weapons of our warfare are... of the flesh” and ineffective, rather than spiritual and “divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Cor. 10:4).

The principle of civil obedience applied in the Old Testament as well. Even while His people were captive in the distant, pagan land of Babylon, the Lord commanded them, “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 have welfare” (Jer. 29:7).

As alluded to above, there is but one limitation to the believer’s obligation under the Lord to willing and complete submission to civil authority: namely, any law or command that would require disobedience to God’s Word.

When the pharaoh ordered the Jewish midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill all male babies when they were born, they “feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live” (Ex. 1:17). Because those women refused to disobey God by committing murder, God honored that civil disobedience and “was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty” (v. 20). When the four young Jewish men named Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were commanded to eat “from the king’s choice food and from the wine which he

drank,” they respectfully refused, because it would have meant defiling themselves by breaking of the Mosaic dietary laws. In order to keep from offending the king, Daniel suggested to the commander that the four of them “ ‘be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence, and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king’s choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.’ So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days.” God honored and blessed that faithfulness, “and at the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king’s choice food” (Dan. 1:12–15).

It is important to note that, even while refusing to do what God had forbidden, those four faithful men of God showed respect for the human authority they had to disobey. Speaking for the other three as well as for himself, Daniel did not demand deference to their beliefs but respectfully “*sought permission* from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself” (v. 8, emphasis added), and he referred to themselves as the commander’s “servants” (vv. 12–13). In obeying God, they did not self-righteously or disrespectfully malign, contend with, or condemn civil authority.

Two other familiar accounts of justifiable civil disobedience are also recorded in that book. When King Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to worship his gods and the golden image he had erected, they “answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up’ ” (Dan. 3:16–18). Again God blessed their faithfulness, to the extent that “the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them” (v. 27).

At the instigation of his commissioners and satraps, who were jealous of Daniel’s royal favor, a later Babylonian king, Darius, issued a decree “that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lions’ den” (Dan. 6:7). Daniel respectfully but firmly refused to obey the decree, and the king reluctantly had him thrown into the lions’ den. Once again, God honored his servant’s faithfulness. “Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he had trusted in his God” (v. 23). Again it is important to note Daniel’s lack of malice and his genuine respect for the human authority his conscience forced him to disobey. After being released unharmed, he said “O king, live forever!” (v. 21).

When the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem warned Peter and John “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18), the apostles replied, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20). The Lord had commanded, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19–20), and therefore to obey those human rulers would mean to disobey their divine Ruler, which they would not do. When Peter and John persisted in their evangelization, the Jewish leaders warned them again, “saying, ‘We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.’ But Peter and the apostles answered and said, ‘We must obey God rather than men’ ” (Acts 5:28–29).

Like individual believers, a local church is obligated to observe civil laws such as zoning, building codes, fire safety regulations, and every other law and regulation that would not cause them to disobey God’s Word. A church is only justified in disobeying an ordinance that, for example, would require acceptance of homosexuals into church membership or of hiring them to work on staff.

In most of the world today, even including many former communist lands, Christians seldom face the need to “obey God rather than men.” By far our most common obligation, therefore, is to obey both God and men.

Some years ago, the tax department of the state of California issued a broadly-worded form that required all tax-exempt organizations, including churches, to attest that they did not and would not engage in political activities. A number of local congregations arched their backs, as it were, and refused to sign the affidavit, which resulted in their buildings being boarded up by state officials. Although he had no association with those churches and was not asked by them to intervene, a prominent Christian attorney talked with state officials on the churches’ behalf. He explained that a Christian’s conscience sometimes requires him to take certain positions on moral issues that relate to civil laws, but that those positions come from religious convictions that are based on Scripture, not on political ideology. Appreciating that explanation, the state officials reworded the form in a way that better protected religious rights. Conflicts do not, of course, always work out that favorably, but churches and individual believers should make every effort to explain carefully and respectfully their reasons for wanting a civil law or mandate to be changed that they believe would force them to disobey God.

In most matters we are to respect and obey civil laws and ordinances, and we are to do it ungrudgingly. Even when conscience leaves us no alternative but to disobey human authority, we do

so with respect and with willingness to suffer whatever penalties or consequences may result.

Although He sends His own people “out as sheep in the midst of wolves,” our Lord commands us to “be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). We are to be alert, cautious, and concerned about what is going on around us and in the world. But that must not be the focus of our attention, and our living in the midst of it must be innocent—free of anxiety, ill will, rancor, and self-righteousness. Men “will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues,” Jesus continued to warn; “and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt. 10:18–20). Furthermore, “brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved” (vv. 21–22).

Persecution is not cause for rebellion but for patient endurance and righteousness. It is not that a Christian should seek persecution or should not try to escape it when possible. Persecution in itself has no spiritual value. Therefore, “whenever they persecute you in this city,” Jesus went on to say, “flee to the next” (v. 23).

Regardless of the failures of government—many of them immoral, unjust, and ungodly—Christians are to pray and live peaceful lives that influence the world by godly, selfless living, not by protests, sit-ins, and marches, much less by rebellion. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, we have both the right and the obligation to confront and oppose the sins and evils of our society, but only in the Lord’s way and power, not the world’s. In this way, says Paul, our living is “good and profitable for men” (Titus 3:8), because it shows them the power of God in salvation. They see what a person saved from sin is like.

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