

Civil Government in this Age

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[0:00] Romans 13, verse 1-7. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.!

Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

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. 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. Therefore, one must be in subjection. Not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience.

[1:10] For because of this, you also pay taxes. For the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

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.

Honour to whom honour is owed. Good morning. Lovely to have a few visitors among us this morning and familiar faces. So, welcome to you guys and lovely to have you with us this morning.

My name's Sam. I'm one of the elders here. And, yeah, I'll be preaching this morning. You may have noticed that we've skipped ahead to Romans 13.

We're coming back to Romans 12 next week. So, you haven't missed a Sunday. We've just skipped ahead. So, how about I pray and then, yeah, we'll get into it. Dear Father, we thank you for gathering us together this morning.

[2:18] We thank you that we can hear from your word. We pray that you would give us grace, me grace to speak, and grace to listen. And we pray that this would bring glory to you.

Amen. C.S. Lewis said, A sick society must think much about politics, as a sick man must think much about his digestion.

I reckon that's a pretty good quote to start us off. We think a fair bit about government and politics in our society. We have a sense that things aren't as they should be.

But we have differing versions of what should be. Thinking about politics elicits all sorts of feelings for us. Victory, despondency, anger, and anxiety.

We can get a bit lost in it all. So, I'd like to put forward another question for us this morning. A different frame of reference for thinking about civil government.

[3:35] When are we? In life, it's important to keep a sense of where we are. Losing a sense of where we are means we get confused, divided about which way to go, anxious and stressed.

But just as important, and particularly for the Christian, is keeping a sense of when we are. At what point in history are we living?

And so, our aim this morning is to think about God's purpose for civil government in this age, at this present time. I have a hunch that asking when we are will help us think through this issue of government.

So, if you want to keep your Bibles open to Romans 13, it would help if you had your sermon outline too, to follow along in your bulletin as a guide to what I'll be saying.

So, the first point there is, know the time. And all of Paul's instructions in chapters 12 and 13 are enclosed by two references to when we are.

[4:52] In chapter 12, verse 2, we scan back there, Paul writes, Do not be conformed to this world. Check your footnote, and world is the same word for age or era.

Do not be conformed to this present and passing age. As he rounds out the section in chapter 13, verse 11, he writes, Besides this, you know the time.

Besides this, meaning on top of all the reasons I've given to heed my instructions, you know the time. So, go and follow my instructions.

Knowing the time will help us live well. But what is this time we are living in? Well, Jesus has come. His kingdom has begun. But we're waiting for him to come again and complete what he started.

Romans chapter 13, verse 12, The night is far gone.

[6:02] The day is at hand. So, with this background, we're going to go through our passage in three sections. Verse 1 and 2, Be subject to governing authorities.

The reason to be subject. Governments ordained duty. A Christian response. The best subjects, in verse 5 to 7.

And then I'll close with two points. Governments and gospel witness. In chapter 12, verse 9 to 21. That's the passage we're going to look at next week, but I'll touch on it this morning. And then finishing with being engaged, but also being detached in light of the times.

So, be subject. Verse 1 and 2. Notice first, in verse 1, who is submitting to the ruling authorities? Every person. It's literally every soul. And contrast this with the instruction, back in chapter 12, verse 19.

[7:11] Beloved, never avenge yourselves. By beloved, Paul marks out just the Christians. But in this instruction, of chapter 13, the scope is wider.

It's every person. So, why does Paul address every person when he's only writing to the Christians in Rome? We've seen in Romans that Paul is uniting Jew and Gentile with the gospel all the way through.

And he's doing it now in this instruction about government. Jews hated Romans. The Romans were in their promised land. Now, they were being asked to submit to Roman government.

On top of this, Jews had years and years of spiritual authority and political authority overlapping. Now, Paul was saying their political authority should be given to a pagan ruler.

Roman Christians needed to understand the times. God's Messiah comes first to save. Then he comes a second time to perfect and complete what he started.

[8:24] We're in the in-between. We are subjects of King Jesus, but we submit to civil governments whom he's delegated responsibility, as Tim explained to us in the kids' talk.

Every person, so all of you also. Can Christians serve in government? Can we submit to a non-Christian prime minister? Yes.

Governments are part of God's common grace in this age. Well, if the words every person were a shock to first century believers, the word submit probably causes the most shock to us.

When we hear the word submit or authority, we might think it's something to be rid of. And sadly, authority can be used poorly.

Abuse of authority inflicts damage. Misuse of authority will be judged by God. But authority used well, as God designed, is good.

[9:31] Think of homes with servant leadership, gentleness and clear boundaries. Think of homes without it. Even before the fall, there was authority.

Adam was tasked with putting everything in subjection. Authority is good, and it's from God. But when we hear the word submit, we might have another question.

Do we think of words like passive and silence when we hear the word submit? We'll skip down to verse 7 of chapter 13, and what action does Paul put alongside submit?

What do we owe civil government? Respect. The action of respecting is put alongside submission. And in Ephesians 5, you don't need to look this up, but wives are called to submit to their husbands. And when that command gets repeated, he says, let the wife see that she respects her husband. Submission and respect go together.

[10:41] But does submit mean being passive, being silent in marriage? No. If the husband is leading the family into sin, the Bible does not expect the wife to blindly follow along.

No. No. What we ought to be respecting presupposes the function of civil government, which is in verse 3 to 4.

So I won't get more specific, but submit and respect is to place ourselves under authority from God. It's good, and we shouldn't do it, but it's not necessarily passive or silent.

Ordained. There have been Christians in history and today who believe government is illegitimate or not needed. Unless a command comes from Jesus' lips or the Bible, no one can tell me what to do.

Well, Paul rules that out completely in verse 1 when he says, for there is no authority except from God. Civil governments are from God.

[11 : 56] To resist is to resist what God has put in place. But we might ask, what about the bad ones, Paul? Are they from God?

Well, some use this passage to support the idea that God has put in place every person who has filled the office of magistrate, including the Stalins and the Pol Potts.

Romans 9.17 says of Pharaoh, an evil ruler himself, I've raised you up. God has a permissive will, and so I think that is true.

God does do that. But I think the stress of this passage is more on the office than on the particular person holding office. Paul is not thinking first of Emperor Nero.

He's thinking of the office of Emperor. See what you think. In verse 1, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

[13 : 06] To institute means to arrange over for a purpose. It's a bit of an unfamiliar word to us, but Paul uses a similar word in verse 2, which is more familiar to us.

Those that resist, resist what God has appointed. When we appoint people, we appoint them to a specific task. Some translations, instead of appointed, have ordained.

When we ordained Martin earlier this year, we set him aside to carry out the divine task of elder among us.

We didn't appoint him to mow the lawn. He's free to do that, though. We didn't appoint him to tell us what to cook for dinner. We appointed him to shepherd us with God's word.

And you'll notice in verse 6, if you scan down, Paul uses the word minister of a civil magistrate to support the idea of a God-ordained role with a set of duties to follow.

[14 : 16] Before we move on, I just want you to notice the tense. Those that exist have been instituted by God.

This is something God has completely set up in the past, and it has ongoing consequences. So in case you're thinking this just applied back in Paul's day, it doesn't.

What Paul says about submitting to governments, governments' duty to us, to all persons, applies as long as this age endures.

One last little thing before we move into verse 3 to 4. Most people might be asking if this passage rules out resistance completely.

Is it wrong for Iranian Christians to participate in the overthrow of the Islamic Republic? Was it wrong for the United States to fight a war of independence from Britain?

[15 : 24] Well, just remember this passage is not balanced. It's addressing a time when private revolution was very common. What this passage does say is that civil government is not a law unto themselves.

They are accountable to God. They have a specific set of duties they must give account.

Unfortunately, governments that abdicate their God-ordained role perpetrate some of the worst atrocities and not every afflicted citizen gets freedom.

But this passage does show that every government will be held accountable. What are civil government's duties?

That's next. Government's duty. In our society there's so many functions governments perform. There's hardly an area of life in which our government doesn't influence or legislate. Yet, Paul's description of what governments do is just two verses.

[16 : 35] So, I think there are things governments must not do. There are things governments can do. And there are things governments must do.

And Paul is writing about things governments must do. I've got three points to make here. They're not on your bulletin but they're all words that start with P.

Punitive, preserve and provisional. And behind it all is God's common grace. Right in the middle of verse 3 to 4 Paul says, For he is God's servant for your good.

For every person's good. Common grace, what's that? Well, remember when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden? The consequence was if you eat of it you shall surely die.

But did they die straight away? No. God allowed life to continue outside the garden. Farming and food production albeit with thorns and thistles.

[17 : 47] Families and raising of children albeit with pain. Government for everyone preserving a measure of peace and order. Common grace on everyone so that his plan of salvation based on

special grace could run its course until perfect and complete.

So for your good governments for your good but how? So three Ps. The first is punitive. Their essential task is to carry out punitive justice.

Punitive means punishment and remember from our justice and mercy series there's different types of justice there's retributive justice which is sort of what we think of the most then there's restorative justice and there's also positive justice so you know things as they should be.

Governments must carry out retributive justice but particularly punitive justice. Verse 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 and avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Do you bristle a bit with that you know shuffle around in your seats sounds a bit backward surely we've progressed past this but when Paul talks about this age in Galatians he refers to it as this evil age.

[19:21] This is the age that started in Genesis 4 with Cain killing Abel. Yet God values human life enough to delegate governments with punitive justice and this is a good thing.

An implication before we move on to the next P. Christians can't exercise punitive justice. Churches can't exercise punitive justice.

That would be bad. But in this age it's good that government does and we can and should support government to exercise this capacity. There are limits.

Governments carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer not indiscriminately on the wrongdoer. It's a good thing. The next P is preserve.

As governments carry out punitive justice they aren't a terror to good conduct. It would be a foolish government that objected to citizens starting businesses that employed people or citizens that looked after the weakest and poorest.

[20:35] No, verse 3, they're not a terror to good conduct they're a terror to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?

Then do good and you will receive his approval. By holding the sword they promote the good. I think this is something that we sort of squirm a little bit at but unfortunately that's how things work in this age.

Good behaviour comes by coercion. When governments don't use the sword the restraints weaken. Evil gets a foothold. My parents were at the Sydney Opera House on the 11th of October 2023 attending a concert.

And that night people were gathering to mourn the massacre and kidnapping of Jews at a music festival. Another crowd had gathered at the Opera House that night to chant where's the Jews? My mum and dad didn't feel safe and nobody else did. It could have been stopped but it wasn't. Chris Minns, the Premier, had the fortitude to later say something to the effect of something should have been done that night to prevent evil conduct getting a foothold but it wasn't.

[22:00] Governments have an important job and we ought to be thankful for when they get it right. The last P is provisional. Civil government is a stop gap for a period of time.

when we get Laura to come and babysit for Geordie or Carol to come and babysit for Geordie their job is to keep Geordie fed and alive until we come home.

If they start renovating and knocking walls down in our house they're not babysitting. They're making themselves permanent. and a babysitter can do an enormous amount of damage if they start home renovations.

It's never happened by the way. The point is that there are limits on the good government can achieve. There are stopgap.

And we should be thankful for the benefits and welfare governments provide. Our family receives a lot of benefits. from government that we're extremely thankful of.

[23:14] But these goods are genuine but they're penultimate not ultimate. And whenever governments try to achieve ultimate goods heaven on earth, utopia, it always leads to enormous damage.

Where do we see this in the passage? Well notice the distinct lack of gospel language compared to adjacent passages. There's no forgiveness of sin, no reconciliation, no mention of new creation. The focus is on retributive justice, not restorative or positive forms of justice. Civil government only has a coercive instrument that can't change hearts.

So something to think about an implication, governments win elections by making promises, don't they? And for Christians, again, we ought to be thankful for the goods they provide to society but we can be discerning about the goods that are promised.

Governments can't provide everything that is good. Christians, the best subjects, verse 5 to 7. So verse 5 to 7 concludes the instruction.

[24 : 37] It starts by giving two reasons to be in subjection to civil authorities. Verse 5, be in subjection not only to avoid God's wrath. Pause there.

As teachers know, fear of negative consequence is a useful tool in the classroom but it has this one drawback. What happens when the teacher isn't looking?

Paul gives a second reason and this I think is unique to the Christian. Be in subjection not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

Whose conscience? Verse 6, for because of this you also pay taxes. It's the Christian conscience who knows all authority is from God.

And so Christians are the best subjects because when no one is looking, he still pays. When no one is looking, he still works because his praise is from God, not man.

[25 : 44] Taxes. Can we pay taxes gladly? We don't normally pay taxes gladly. We pay our ministers, David and Martin.

As a result, they attend to their God-given duty. With taxes, we pay our civil government to attend to their duty, the upholding of peace and order.

As a result, we can travel outside our homes without fear of being robbed. God. We can go to work and expect a fair wage. We can live in homes that have been built to code.

Even if we don't completely understand what that code is, we can be assured that our roofs won't fall on top of us. Verse 6, for because of this, you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing.

Someone said that with taxes I buy civilisation. Honour and respect. Paul has explained the good purposes of civil government for this age and now expects Christians with a renewed mind to discern to whom payment is due, then give it.

[27 : 02] We have a pretty low view of politicians in Australia, don't we? It's a national sport to poke fun, slander and belittle. Take note again of the titles God uses of government, God's deacons, God's ministers.

And verse 7, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed. It's not a blanket statement though. When our PM makes lewd jokes about women, Paul says respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

But when the trains run on time, when we can travel freely, provide for our families, raise our families, meet here on a Sunday, enjoy a charitable financial status, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

Governments and gospel witness. Before I conclude, I want to make a quick observation about next week's passage. It shed some further insight into God's purpose for civil government.

Romans 12, 9 to 21, next week, contains instructions for Christians to outsiders. It's about gospel witness to the outside world.

[28 : 29] If you could put your finger on verse 19. What's interesting is that what God forbids a Christian to do, he authorises government to do.

Verse 19, Christians are never to avenge themselves. Yet this is the very thing governments do. And the obvious point is that the church is not meant to bear the sword.

That's the state's job. But there's another implication. Think about this. If the state fails in their duty to punish evil, protect its citizens, preserve peace, will that make it easier or harder for gospel witness?

Humanly speaking, it gets harder, doesn't it? Churches have to go underground. Government doing their job provides a stage like this for the gospel to go out.

God's love. So we should keep praying as Paul does in 1 Timothy 2. In our country and all nations, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

[29 : 51] This is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. engaged and detached.

I'll finish on this. All of us long for good government. It's why we complain so much. We're acutely aware of how far, how short rulers fall from the ideal that's in our hearts.

There's a sickness, as C.S. Lewis said. But if we keep reflecting, we might realise that it's not just government's problem, it's ours too.

If you're new to the Bible and this Christian stuff, can I talk to you? There's a king who we've sung about this morning, a king who came from another country.

He lived among us for a short time. He showed glimpses of perfect justice. He put wrongs to right. He led for others, not himself. Then he died and came back to life and went away.

[31 : 06] He's returning. And when he does, there won't just be glimpses of justice, but the whole world will be filled with perfect justice and every wrong put to right.

Psalms 72 says about this king, may he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

May his rule spread everywhere. That psalm goes on to talk about prosperity that spreads across the whole world.

Crops growing on mountaintops and no neediness, no poor. Would you like to live under that king? I do, and I hope you do. But what about the wrong we've done? The evil in this age that's in us as well. When this king came the first time, and like government we've read about today, he didn't avenge the wrongdoer.

[32 : 17] He took the punishment of the wrongdoer on himself. He drank the cup of punitive justice on himself. He died and he buried that debt, and he did that for us.

When he came back to life, he went away preparing this place we've read about. He's patiently waiting so that all who call on him can live with him as their king in this next stage.

So call on him before he returns. Don't wait till he comes back because that will be too late. For Christians, brothers and sisters, be engaged as your circumstances permit.

It's an act of love for our neighbour as we petition government for the common good. keep government accountable for what is wrong and what is good.

Vote wisely, knowing that not all that is good can be achieved by government in this age. Hopefully you've picked up that the vision Paul has of civil government is chastened.

[33 : 35] It's a bit sober. It's minimal. what governments must do is important but limited. Therefore our good but penultimate goods not ultimate goods.

So I want to urge us to be engaged but also detached because our hope is for a better country. This country is real.

C.S. Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce* about heaven and hell provocatively writes that the grass in heaven hurts your feet. It's that real.

It's beyond all comparison to what we experience now says Paul in 2 Corinthians 4.17. Yes it's difficult. It's unseen. We can only see this country with the eyes of our hearts.

Ephesians 1.18. So to which country is your hope fixed? Which country occupies your thoughts?

Hebrews 11 says this about Abraham and I want to say to us be like Abraham.

[34 : 48] By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance and he went out not knowing where he was going.

By faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land living in tents with Isaac and Jacob heirs with him of the same promise. Abraham was in the promised land but he still considered it a foreign land and that wasn't just because King David wasn't reigning.

for he was looking forward to the city whose foundations whose designer and builder is God.

Verse 13 these all died Abraham Isaac Jacob in faith not having received the things promised but having seen them with the eyes of their heart and greeted them from afar and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth for the people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland if they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out they would have had opportunity to return but as it is they desire a better country a heavenly one therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared for them a city see rejoice with the eyes of your heart the city our homeland God is preparing acknowledge your status as stranger in exile desire a better country as we engage we might feel increasingly displaced like we don't belong

God won't be ashamed to call you his God in this age be engaged and attached may he help us to live well in this age while we wait for his return Amen may