

The Christian & Civil Authorities

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[0 : 00] Good morning church family. I'm going to do our Bible reading today. So it is from Romans chapter 13, starting at verse 1, going through to verse 7.

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.

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 : 09] For because of you, for because of this, you also pay taxes, for the authorities and 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.

Honour to whom The government says not to do, or vice versa.

Although, to be honest, I've got to admit that during lockdown, when I've been tempted to disobey the laws, usually it's personal comforts that is the cause of the temptation.

But we've all faced this question recently, haven't we? It's becoming a hot topic among evangelical Christians. And that's why we're doing this one-off sermon on Christians' response to government.

[2 : 40] So we've all been facing this. Whether it's the concern for loved ones doing it tough, am I allowed to visit them? Is there a point where their welfare becomes more important than the rules?

You might have concerns about the vaccine with your own body. Or the recent publication of the roadmap out of lockdown.

You might be concerned about the state overreaching on personal and religious freedoms.

Although legally, we're on very shaky ground legally to claim these freedoms.

Still, you might be worried. Where is this country headed? Where is this state headed? Is this the thin end of the wedge? Are things going to get worse?

Now, some listening this morning might be afraid that I'm about to add a church mandate on your choices, increasing your dilemma at the moment.

[3 : 47] My aim this morning is to show the biblical principles. Because in our current atmosphere of fear, some in the evangelical church have lost sight even of the basics.

Excuse me. Let me get a drink of water. Let me say that again. Some in this atmosphere of fear, some in the evangelical church have lost sight of even the basics.

And that's why we're doing this topic at the moment. When emotions are high, it's always good to go back to basics and get our bearings. So when is it right to disobey the government?

The Australian Christian Lobby think it's time. They have endorsed a petition to the Prime Minister. You've probably heard of it. The Ezekiel Declaration. Subtitle, Watchman, It's Time to Speak.

Now, in Ezekiel, it's to look out. The watchman looks out for an invading army. So in Ezekiel, that's God's judgment coming to warn people of the coming wrath.

[4 : 59] The tone of this petition is saying to our Prime Minister, if you restrict church attendance, God's judgment is coming. Accept church disobedience.

I don't think this question of when is it right to disobey is the right place to start. Let me just give one reason for the sake of time and why this isn't the right place to start.

In our passage this morning, Romans 13, which is the most developed teaching on the Christian's attitude and the command on Christians to respond to civil authorities, to our surprise, maybe to your disappointment, the Apostle Paul gives an unqualified endorsement of government and never answers the question.

If he doesn't answer our question, we should stop and think we are probably asking the wrong question. If you are thinking it's time to disobey, let me build up your case for a moment.

And to do this, get your Bible out. Let's open to Romans 13. Let's sit under God's word together and have a look at the context of Romans 13.

[6 : 20] Now, Romans, the letter was written, And most scholars agree about 20 to 30 years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. And as you probably know, Roman Empire was far from a democracy.

The emperor at the time was Nero. And although his early reign was not so bad, later, he would hold a garden party where the lanterns in the party were Christians on stakes being burnt alive to illumine the festivities.

This was a dangerous place to live. And increasingly in the church, as Jews disassociated themselves from Christians, the church found themselves with no rights, no protections whatsoever. And Paul himself, who is writing this, would experience prison with a threat of death, day or night, way more than any of us are going to experience.

At the end of the book of Acts, that's where we find Paul, in prison in Rome. Although we see there that Paul is in prison, that God's word is never chained.

[7 : 31] Tradition tells us that Paul himself would be beheaded in Rome. Surely this man would have something to say about disobedience. Now, let's get into the text.

Notice the flow of Romans, how seemingly out of place these seven verses in chapter 13 are. After 11 chapters of explaining the wonderful mercy of God in saving rebellious sinners through Jesus, this new age of salvation, chapter 12 begins, the implications of how we are to respond to God's mercy.

Have a look at chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. We're not meant to live like the rest of this sinful world anymore.

We've been saved from that. Verses 3 to 8 show the mutual submission and harmony within the church. Verses 9 to 21 of chapter 12 explain how love is to be our modus operandi, relating to everyone, believers, unbelievers, especially when we're mistreated.

[8 : 59] And then after our section on authority in chapter 13, Paul goes back to the topic of love. It's our duty. It fulfills the law. And then he finishes by motivating us.

The darkness of our times is passing away. But we belong to the new day of salvation. So let's act like it. Let's put on the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This age we're living in won't last. By God's mercy, we have a new Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't be conformed to this sinful world.

It's going to be passing away. Offer yourselves in worship to God. If we believe all that, here's the real question we should be asking.

Why should we recognise the authority of government at all? We shouldn't be conformed to this world. Jesus is our Lord. This age is passing away.

[10 : 02] We belong to the King. Why should we recognise their authority at all? I might be getting some of you nervous at this point.

What's this sermon going to be about? But now we have the right question. Let's listen to what the answer is. Let's humble ourselves before Romans 13.

Paul doesn't say that we just need to put up with governance.

He states their authority as high as it goes. He states it as positively as he can. Have a look at verse 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.

Verse 2. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. So we've got a command. Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities.

[11 : 21] We've got the reason. There is no authority except from God. They've been instituted by God. Here's the implication. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists God.

In verse 4, he calls the civil authorities God's servants. And then in verse 6, he uses the word servant again, but he states it even more positively.

ESV tries to translate the Greek with the authorities are ministers of God. What they're trying to capture there is that word is always used in terms of servants in God's temple.

That's how closely Paul shows the authority of our governments to the authority of God. They are serving God.

Now, they may not be conscious of this, but their authority comes from God, and they are serving God's purposes. Why God used the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, or the Persian king, Cyrus.

[12 : 27] So let me pause and ask at this point, do you believe that all levels of our government, all levels, have been put there by God and have a God-given function to perform?

So what is that function? What is their purpose? It's very clear in here, to administer justice. Have a look at verse 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. God has given them the sword, or in our case, the gun, to punish those who violate laws.

Paul is assuming for his argument's sake that the laws of the state embody the moral principles in God's word. Christian individuals, we hear in chapter 12, have no right to take vengeance out, but the state does.

God has put the state there to reward good and punish evil, and that is a really, really good thing.

[13 : 46] There was a break-in next door to church about seven years ago after youth group.

Where BCF used to be, there was this motorcycle shop.

Actually, I think it's becoming a motorcycle shop again. But there was a break-in next door, and the alarm was going off, and a neighbour had called the cops. And so there was this young man and a young woman who were on our property acting suspicious.

So I wasn't quite willing to leave our property at that point. But within minutes, the cops turned up.

Like six or seven police cars, with their lights flashing, turned up.

And they all had guns on their hips, and I was not a little bit intimidated by the show of force. And they took charge of the situation quickly. They even discovered on this guy a knife that they confiscated very quickly.

I went home that night very thankful for the police. I was quite impressed. The feeling of safety was wonderful.

[14 : 58] When you're on a train or at a station at night and there's drunken idiots around, don't you wish that the police would show up? Aren't you more at peace if they're there? Our government can issue fines and use handcuffs and guns, and this is a wonderful gift of God, to keep order in a society full of sinful people like you and me.

The law can't save society, but it can restrain and preserve society. They have the God-given right to tell us what to do and then use coercion, if necessary, to make us do it.

And if you think about it, the freedoms we enjoy is because they limit lesser freedoms. When you're driving, the death toll on the road in Australia is much less than in other countries where there's basically no rules.

I sometimes see people running a red light late at night if they think there's no cop around, but the threat of punishment if they do get caught is a big reason why I have confidence to go through an intersection when my light turns green.

Removing that lesser freedom of telling us when to stop and when to go, that threat of punishment, we actually have greater freedom to stay alive on the road.

[16 : 27] You might be feeling like the government is overusing their coercive powers at the moment.

Can I just ask you to pause and ask yourself, do you recognise that they are God's servants? Do you balance your frustration with thankfulness for our government as you should?

For this point, let me reword Monty Python, their famous sketch, what have the Romans ever done for us? The New South Wales government has taken away everything we have.

And what has the New South Wales government ever done for us? Clean water supply, sanitation.

Okay. I grant you water supply and sanitation.

Food, public toilets. It's safe to walk the streets at night.

[17:40] They're the only ones who could keep ordering this place. All right then. Apart from clean water supply, sanitation, irrigation, medicine, education, food and wine, public toilets, making it safe to walk the streets at night, what has the New South Wales government ever done for us?

Do people sense your high view of governing authorities? Do people sense your deep thankfulness?

Or do they just hear you complaining? We are called to submit not only to those in Parliament who are Christian, not only when they are carrying out God's word of what is right and wrong, but we are called to submit all the time.

Submission goes deeper than our behaviour to an attitude of heart. I'm going to use Douglas Moose commentary, his definition of submission.

Submission is acknowledging the divinely ordained status of government and its consequent right to demand the believers' allegiance.

[18:56] Now, allegiance is a strong word, isn't it? But do you remember Romans 12 verse 1? In view of God's mercy, we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice.

It's not just our souls and our mind, our behaviour, this embodied existence, whatever situation we're in, which includes the governments over us, everything, all of life is an act of worship.

Submission is an act of worship. Allegiance to God, the highest authority, almost always means allegiance to our government and what they tell us to do.

Worship might... Oh, no, I'll come back to that later. We'll leave that question of when to disobey till later. No matter what happens, verse 7, We are to give respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

Whether we're in New South Wales or, as Joel asked in our small group, imagine applying this in Afghanistan at the moment. Respect and honour are still owed in Myanmar while they're taking away oxygen tanks.

[20:19] It runs deeper than obedience and disobedience. And any parent of teenagers, or if you've ever been a teenager, will know there is a difference between obeying begrudgingly and gladly recognising the authority that parents have over you.

Parents can still feel disrespected when their teenager is disobeying, or obeying, rather, the begrudgingly. Some public figures at the moment are calling our governments tyrannical or a dictatorship.

What is far from respectful is the labels some use of our officials. Australia has COVID concentration camps, is a quote.

A COVID dictatorship. Calling our premiers, dictator Dan or Gulag Gladys. Trying to save lives is a far cry from the deadly regimes under Stalin or Pol Pot.

Christians should be different in our language towards our governing authorities. This matter is a matter of worship.

[21:40] And we see it even in taxes. Taxes is mentioned here. By paying taxes, doesn't that show that we recognise the authority they have over us?

When you submit your tax return and you realise you have to pay so much to the government, so much of your paycheck goes to the government, do you see that as an act of worship to the Lord? We're given two motivations to obey, to submit.

The first we share with unbelievers, verse 5. Therefore, one must be in subjection not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. The first motivation is to avoid punishment.

The second motivation is much more important, much more fundamental, and only Christians have this motivation, conscience. Now, I'm not saying unbelievers don't have a conscience.

[22:42] They do. But they don't acknowledge that they're answerable to God. They don't realise who their conscience is owed to.

As Christians, we do. We know that the rulers have his authority, his total backing. So an example of this.

As I'm driving over the speed limit, I don't just slow down because a cop might catch me. I slow down because I want a clear conscience to relate to God.

I want to do what pleases him by obeying the authorities who have given those road rules. So why should we submit to authorities if we belong to this new age of salvation?

Because they have God's full backing to administer justice, which is such a good thing that we should be thankful for. And because submission, respect is a matter of our daily worship to the Lord.

[23 : 45] So now I want to spend the rest of our time thinking about how we might apply these principles in how we engage in our current situation.

Now, there are real concerns and conversations to be had in this complex time we're living in. Many Christians are demanding religious freedoms or personal freedoms.

But let's just take a step back for a moment and consider what true freedom is. I'm going to borrow from Tim Keller here. Freedom is not simply the absence of restrictions, but rather consists of finding the right liberating restrictions.

You grow only as you lose some lower kinds of freedom to gain higher kinds of freedom. So in marriage, we might say, still Keller speaking, we lose our independence in order to gain new freedom.

So if we give ourselves to our God, our true love, we will become more free than we can imagine. We will be free from fears, insecurity and shame.

[25 : 04] We will be free to forgive, free to love others, to face suffering in a way we could not before. Do you hear the difference in what freedom is?

Our society is demanding personal freedoms, but that's not Christian freedom. Do you believe that Christ is in charge? Ephesians 1 says that the Father has put all things under his feet.

He has given him his head over all things for the church's sake. Or as Matthew's gospel finishes, Jesus says all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Surely I am with you and to the end of the age. Do you know what the most repeated command in the New Testament is?

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Panic leads to self-protection. That the peace we have in Christ frees us to love.

[26 : 15] Do you believe that Christ is in charge of every policy our government makes? Do you believe that Christ is in charge of the health or sickness of your body?

Do you believe that Christ is in charge even when people try to put you to shame? True freedom is knowing Christ is in charge and that you are precious to the one who is in charge.

I don't need to repent. I have a peace that nothing can touch. And so I can act out of love, not fear. Let me read what freedom looks like. How we should be engaging on social media. How we should be discussing things with our family, with our church family.

How we should be engaging in society and politics. Have a look at chapter 12 from verse 9. Let love be genuine.

[27 : 21] Abhor what is evil. Hold fast what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour.

Do not be slothful in zeal but fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show your hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Repay no one evil for evil. But give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

[28 : 16] Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God for it is written.

Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

True freedom is seen in the peace we have in Christ that we can lay our rights down in love for others. It is freedom from our sin and self-protection to worship God from our heart by loving those around us, even those who harm us.

I think there's a danger at the moment among Christians to make a specific action the main measure for their faithfulness to God.

But if worship is from the heart, yes, our choices, our behaviour matters, but we need to allow flexibility for Christians to arrive at different conclusions after we listen to each other and discuss

things.

[29 : 34] Our society has thrown out God's word as the authority, so the only way to push for what you think is true is to shout louder than the other person, to force your opinion.

Let me borrow it from Keller again. Without a moral source outside of yourself, the only way to resolve these inevitable conflicts among moral ideals is to exercise power.

It means to say to others, this is right simply because I say so and I have the power to force you to comply. If you are proposing a position that some behaviour is wrong and should be stopped, there's no way to justify or even have a conversation about it with someone who disagrees.

All you can do is shout the other person down. End quote. Now, obviously that includes literal shouting, but also shaming and labelling the person rather than debating truth, demanding your opinion be taken as truth and unchallenged.

But we as believers have God's word to guide us in these times. Any of this kind of shouting is totally out of place for a child of God. Let's talk.

[30 : 51] Let's debate. Let's allow other Christians to speak into our thinking. A common mistake we easily make is confusing a biblical principle with a concrete practice of how it must be expressed.

So take a husband. A husband confuses the biblical principle of his wife showing respect with the practice of agreeing with his logic and his conclusions.

They're not the same thing. Pointing out flaws in logic, factors that aren't considered, disagreeing with the final implication, they can all be respectful.

Let's not confuse the principle with how that principle is to be expressed. As we discuss matters among believers, let's bring other people in our thinking, bring all God's wisdom to bear.

Let's be careful not to confuse principle with practice. Let's allow flexibility of implications where scripture allows us freedom. Now, some might be afraid that these restrictions on religious expression aren't just temporary.

[32 : 06] But on this point, we need to remember that while our behaviour is important, God primarily looks at the desires and motives of our heart to see if we are worshipping.

There is a much greater danger to worship than external restrictions. The biggest danger is a rebellious attitude of heart.

At the heart of all of us since the fall of Adam is a mistrust in authority, whether it's parents' authority, husbands, bosses, church leaders or governments.

They're all symptoms of a deeper mistrust in God's use of his authority. It's not that some of us are anti-authoritarian. All of us are by nature.

That's called sin. We are not submissive by nature. There is a greater danger to our worship and it's that unsubmitive attitude.

[33 : 11] Think back with me before COVID if you can. Some are afraid that there will be discrimination based on vaccine about welcoming all people at church in the future.

But think back when we didn't have any restrictions. Were you constantly eager to welcome all different types of people by who you talked to when the service ended?

We can't sing. Was your heart back then consistently warmed by the truths of the gospel that you couldn't help but express the inexpressible through singing?

There is a much greater danger than external restrictions. External restrictions can only get skin deep to our worship. The rebellious spirit, it erodes worship altogether.

That's the real danger. Let me put that positively. The government has no jurisdiction or coercive power over our heart.

[34 : 18] We are always free to worship. Let's finally come back to that question we started with after laying all this necessary groundwork first.

Remember the basics. What if worship of God requires us to disobey his servants, his delegated authorities?

Then the command to submit, to respect and show honour still applies. A worshipful, submissive spirit will try and find every possible way to obey.

Failing that, a worshipful, submissive spirit will disobey only as a last resort and still with respect.

Now, many quote Acts 5 as a license to disobey government.

Peter boldly says to the Jewish council, we must obey God rather than men. But those who cite this usually fail to mention the full story.

[35 : 30] Remember the respect the apostles showed those authorities. Let me recap the story. They were preaching the name of Jesus and the officials told them not to do that.

They were arrested, put in prison. But overnight, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, frees them and tells them, keep speaking. Keep telling people about Jesus, this life.

So the next morning, they obey. They do it. And after hilarious debacles of the officials working out why is this prison empty, they send police to the temple where they were preaching to arrest them. But the apostles are protected by the crowds. The crowds were ready to protect the apostles using violence. So the apostles had divine authority to stay and preach.

They had the crowd's protection. They did not need to be arrested that day. But what did they do? They entrusted themselves to their God who could say.

[36 : 36] They laid down their rights, recognizing their God-given authority as officials, and they went with them, knowing they would be unjustly treated and beaten.

And at the end of it, they rejoiced for belonging to the highest name. They were not allowed. That's freedom. That's respect. If Christians shout and demand religious freedoms, we obscure what Christianity is about.

Christians just sound like other disgruntled people who want their personal freedoms back. but if you can gladly lay down your rights out of love for others that kind of worship will be like a life amidst the fear at the moment and the primary way we can continue to submit to our leaders is to pray for our leaders the early church father clement he lived through nero's reign and domitian's much more persecution than we are likely to face this is his prayer later in life thou oh lord and master has given them remember he's talking about the roman empire here has given them the power of sovereignty through thine excellent and unspeakable might that we knowing the glory and honor which thou has given them i submit ourselves to them in nothing resisting i will grant them therefore oh lord health peace concord and stability that they may without failure administer the government which thou has committed to them do thou oh lord direct their counsel according to what is good and acceptable in thy sight that they administering in peace and gentleness with godliness the power which thou has committed to them may obtain your favor that's respect that's freedom we are always called to be submissive as we worship the lord our breath is better spent praying than shouting laying down our rights that worshipful submissive spirit is what we owe our lives to picture jesus as he is right now picture him on his throne if you can i don't know how possible this is but picture him as he is in charge over all things right now i'm thinking of isaiah's temple vision with seraphim crying out hold holy hold i'm picturing revelation this majestic figure with a sword coming out of his mouth which is the word of god angels coming and going being sent to do his will present in every moment in every place knowing your personal circumstances while also upholding the universe by the word of his power we don't need to be afraid but now picture him as he stood bloodied from being flogged with a crown of thorns on his head barely holding himself up before pilot the governor knowing the greatest injustice in history was just about to take place he had every right not to be called a sinner and yet he took our sins our rebelliousness upon himself he had every right to command his angels to deliver his right his life and yet he submitted to the unjust ruling of the roman governor trusting god's trusting his father to save him he had every right to have freedom of movement rather than being strung up on a cross he had every right to breathe freely rather than slowly suffocating on the cross and yet he laid it all down for you for me taking the judgment we deserve he freely gave up his last breath we owe our entire life to the authority who freely submitted himself to set us free if you are demeaning your rights and freedoms people will just see another self-centered person just with a religious superiority complex but if people see you freely laying down your rights in order to love others they will see the lord jesus in you so let me finish are others seeing christ's submissive heart in you at the moment can others sense that you have such a high the highest view of the authority of our governments at every level do they hear you qualify your disagreement with government policies with humility in not in recognizing that we don't have all the facts in accepting that this is a very complex situation do people hear you being thankful for our government are you respecting them in in how you call them how you relate to their name are you trying to find every possible way to obey do people sense a greater desire for the interest of others in you or could they confuse your comments with seeking your own personal freedoms do people sense that you have a greater hope and peace that transcend this crisis because you belong to the king of kings this isn't a time to panic and be self-protecting it's a time to show the peace and love that we have in christ's sovereign love for us there is such opportunity in

this time to show jesus this is a matter of worship do others see christ's respectful submissive heart in you will you pray with me let's finish by praying lord jesus we acknowledge that you are king of kings and lord of lords that the coronavirus is not outside of your sovereignty that what happens to our body is not outside of your sovereignty where our nation and state is headed is not outside your sovereignty lord please help us gladly submit to the governments that you have put over us for our good lord please help us as believers individually and as a church family please help us show that that peace and that love that that lays down our rights like you did lord i pray for our governments thank you for them lord please give them wisdom please sustain their strength in this it must be a heavy burden they're carrying please give them your insight into making just decisions please help us to be patient with them when we think they get that wrong lord please help us to be gladly submitting to them trusting you and trusting ourselves to our faithful creator and continuing to do good praise in jesus name amen