

Submitting to Authorities

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[0 : 00] Mark, if you're joining us for the first time, we're going through the series in Romans at the present, on to chapter 13, so that was the second reading. If you have your Bibles there, you'd be good to keep it open at that point.

There is an outline of this sermon as well, either on the website or if you're using Church App, an electronic version in Church App as well. Now, I have to say that given the times we live in, we've come to a rather appropriate passage for today.

Over the last 18 months, we've never before had more intrusions into our lives by the government. You know, normally our governments provide services like health, education, transport.

We pay our taxes and they use it to make our lives easier. Provided we don't break the law, they largely leave us to our own lives. But the pandemic has changed all that, hasn't it?

Now, there are daily actions, that daily press conference impinges directly on our freedoms. What we can do, where we can go, who we can see, even down to having the coverings on our faces dictated to.

[1 : 18] It's no wonder that I think we feel so emotionally drained, because we just can't make decisions on our own. And no wonder we're so divided as well, even though, you know, we all just want to get back to our lives, don't we?

Back to normal. And so, regardless of what you think or feel, or whether the government is doing the right or wrong thing, Paul's instructions in our passage today is actually very timely.

And the main instruction and application comes right up front, so that we don't have to wait for it in suspense. In verse 1, it says so quite clearly, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

The authorities that exist have been established by God. Here, Paul doesn't simply give us the instruction, but the reason for it. As Christians who desire to do the will of God, we are to be subject to the governing authorities.

Why? The first and primary reason is this. Because God has put them there. All authorities that exist have been established by God.

[2 : 36] It's important for this to really sink in. God maintains order in our world through His appointed agents. We might like to only be answerable to God directly, but He has delegated His authority to leaders in this world.

Sometimes you may wish at work simply to answer directly to your CEO. But unless you're the CFO or the general manager, you can't.

The CEO has actually delegated authority to your line manager. And you can't bypass that line of accountability. You try doing that and the CEO will simply direct you straight back to your immediate supervisor.

Now, as Christians, we certainly have a direct line to God, don't we? When we pray, when we read God's Word, God's Spirit counsels us directly. But when it comes to order in society and in organizations, He puts authority in place to act on His behalf.

And get this, they may not even be Christian or God-fearing authorities. In fact, the Bible goes so far even as to say that God anoints some of these pagan authorities, as He did with Cyrus back in the time of Israel.

[4 : 03] So King Cyrus of Persia was a pagan king. And in our Old Testament reading today, Isaiah 45, it says, Later in verses 4 and 5, God adds, So you see, God is free to appoint even those who don't acknowledge Him.

In fact, that's exactly where Jesus found Himself before Pilate. When Jesus said to him in John 19 and verse 11, You have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.

Therefore the one who handed me over to you, that is the Jewish authorities, is guilty of a greater sin. And for Jesus, we know that God put Pilate over Him, even as Pilate was about to pass the most unjust sentence on Him, and send Him to the cross.

And yet Jesus did not resist His authority. At one level, that's because Jesus knew that that was the Father's will, for Him to go to the cross to die for the sins of the world.

But at a practical level, it was because Jesus recognized the authority of Pilate, that He was someone that God had put in authority.

[5 : 49] This even when Pilate uses His power wrongly. This even when many Jews at the time felt that Roman rule was oppressive, that the colonizers were unjust.

Now most people would submit to authorities if they were just, right? But when they don't think that their authority is legitimate, that's so much harder to do, isn't it?

Not to mention that if they passed laws that were evil, or if their deeds were unjust. But as Christians, our view of God's sovereignty needs to be big enough to accept that even these sort of authorities have been established by God.

Now I expect that me just saying this might cause some of you to think, this is just wrong. You might object to it. The thought of God sitting behind and raising evil authorities to have power may just be too hard to stomach.

What about the dictators? What about the oppressive and repressive regimes in the world? Do you mean to tell me that God has put them there? Well, if you stop to think about it though, if we acknowledge that all humanity is fallen and sinful, there is really no such thing as authority that is good, isn't it?

[7 : 17] Or sinless. Even so-called good governments lose their way after a while and do wrong. And so sooner or later, everything is tainted by sin.

And so where do you draw the line then between good authority and evil authority? You can't, can you? And so the instruction here is clear. We are to be subject to all authorities.

For if we don't, Paul goes further in verse 2 to warn us that we'll be in direct rebellion against God. It says, That is a rather stark and sobering warning, isn't it?

And so it pushes those of us who wish to obey God to ask, what does it mean then to be subject to authorities? Does it go so far as to say we have to obey everything that they say, even when it's clearly against God's word?

For example, if we are no longer allowed to pray or read the Bible or share the gospel, do we still comply? Or something a little closer to home at the moment?

[8 : 32] If we can't gather in person at church or if we can't sing when we do, does that mean we still have to be subject to authorities then?

The question is, when does obeying God trump being subject to authorities? Well, I think this is probably the question that's on everyone's mind at the moment.

But rather than giving you the answers, I'll set up some application principles at the end to get you to think through it for yourself. But before we get there, Paul has further motivation for being subject to authorities in verses 3 and 4.

So read with me. Paul says, So let's deal with the easy scenario first.

And that's when the rulers ask of us what is aligned with God's will. And we know that in that instance, we should obey. And when we do, Paul says we have nothing to fear.

[9 : 54] We've done the right thing. If, however, anyone steps over the mark, then the rulers are God's agents appointed to bear the sword and to punish the wrongdoer on God's behalf.

But what if, as we considered earlier, the laws are clearly wrong? What if we're not allowed to confess our faith in Jesus, say? Wouldn't we be punished for doing right?

And so Paul is wrong here? Well, look at Paul's words closely. Look exactly at what he has promised. He does not promise, does he, that there wouldn't be punishment if we do right, only that there will be if we do wrong.

But, even when we do right and are punished, the truth is, we still do not need to fear, as Paul says, because we will still be commended.

By whom? Paul does not say explicitly, does he? But what's implied is that even if the authorities don't commend us because they're evil, God will if we do what's right by Him.

[11 : 01] We may have to wait until the very end before we find out in clear terms that we've done right. But God's commendation will come for those who do right.

But as I'll expand on later, even when in these rare circumstances we do need to disobey the authorities in order to obey God, we can still do it in a way that's subject to the authorities. But I have to say that more often than not, these are exceptions to the main. Instead, more often than not, what authorities require of us don't cause us to disobey God. More often than not, a way can be found to obey God and still comply with a law which at first sight we think, oh, that's against God's will. Life may be harder as a result. We try to find this way through. But we should really only disobey when there's really no other option, when it's so clear that what we do is against God's will.

[12 : 06] Now, we mustn't underestimate how hard this teaching was actually for the Christian Jews at the time. After all, they had seen themselves as God's chosen people.

They had been promised a king of their own and not to be under foreign rule. But Paul was showing them what the gospel now means in light of Jesus' coming. That God's promises to them are now fulfilled in Christ whose kingdom, he's our king, but he has a kingdom that is no longer temporal or political. His kingdom is not of this world, in other words. And so God can bless his people regardless of what political situation that they find themselves in. After all, if you recall, even in the Old Testament, God was able to bless them and rescue them even while they were under slavery, weren't they, in Egypt. And so now, Paul is saying, God can do the same even as they lived under the oppressive rule of the Romans.

[13 : 12] And that's true for us as well. Our fate as God's people doesn't depend on the type of government that we find ourselves under. We could be under labour or coalition.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if the Prime Minister is a Christian or not. In fact, if shock horror, Australia became a dictatorship one day, God is still sovereign and we are still in his loving hands. And so, we can be subject to the authorities even in that extreme situation. Now, of course, if we are blessed to have Christians in government and they rule well as a result, then we praise God for it.

But there's no guarantee that this will always be the case. Nor should we think that we can only serve God if we live under good government. But regardless of whether we do or not, we are called as Christians to be subject to them.

In other words, we mustn't be rebellious of them by nature or try and find any excuse we can to break their rule just because we don't like them.

[14 : 26] Hence, Paul reiterates again in verse 5, therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also as a matter of conscience.

don't just do it, Paul says, to avoid punishment, but for the sake of your own conscience because we're ultimately answerable to God and we want to have a clear conscience before God in this regard that we've obeyed Him by submitting or being subject to authorities.

And so, in practical terms, this means giving authorities what's due to them. And in verses 6-7, Paul says, taxes, revenue, respect, and honor. This is also why you pay taxes, he says, for the authorities are God's servants who give their full time to governing.

Give to everyone what you owe them. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honor, then honor. Now, it's possible these instructions have general application to all people, not just to those in authority.

But I think at this point, given the reference to taxes and revenue, honor and respect, Paul has in mind specifically those in authority. And in particular, Paul says, pay your taxes so the government can do its job properly.

[15 : 48] As for honor and respect, those of us who live in liberal democracies like Australia ought to, I think, pay particular attention to this. You see, we tend to think of our leaders as being accountable to us.

Don't you? We elect them. They serve us. And so, often they too think of their own legitimacy in terms of their popularity.

As long as they do what the people want, they'll get re-elected. But we need to remember this point here, that governments are actually established by God to wield the sword.

They're God's agents to maintain law and order on his behalf. And so, often this may involve decisions that are unpopular because we voters by and large are motivated by self-interest, aren't we?

We don't always like it when they're serving the common good rather than just the individual self-interest. But as Christians, we mustn't think like that but recognize that when they act as God's agents and they make decisions that are not popular and not in our interest, then even then we ought to show honor and respect to them.

[17 : 05] And so, that's the first principle of application if you look at your outline for today. Honor and respect all authorities. That's being subject to them involves honoring and respecting them.

Whether you like the leader or not, whether you agree with their decisions or not, recognize their positions of authority. And we can be thankful again that in a democracy, you know, we can vote to change a government at the right time.

There are legal means to voice our objections when we disagree. You know, writing to our MPs, signing petitions, even protesting if it's done legally.

And we should be thankful that we have a judicial system that acts impartially and brings the government to account. And there's an opposition in Parliament to do the same.

All of which means that we can voice our concerns even while still honoring and respecting the people in power. Because doing that recognizes that God has put them there.

[18 : 11] So, let me give you a specific example. So, I think, for example, that it's okay to protest peacefully as the law allows. But I've sometimes seen the placards that are waved at these protests, which clearly show disrespect to those in authority.

Well, they've crossed the line there, haven't they? They've gone from voicing their concerns, which you can do in a passionate way, to doing things that are undermining the authority of those God has put in power.

And so, we shouldn't do that, should we? We can raise our objections in a respectful way that still honors the people that have been put in authority. Now, the next principle which I've already alluded to is that we need to try our best to obey unless we've no option and doing so is clearly against God's will.

Now, of course, the challenge is, as I've said before, where do we draw the line? And it's not always clear, is it? But if we're genuine about wanting to do this, then we need to make an effort to really grapple with trying to know God's will.

And in the first instance, that means understanding and knowing God's word, learning to understand and apply God's word in the right context. Now, in most cases, as I said again, this should be quite clear.

[19 : 32] But there are instances where there is discernment that is required. And for some of us, we may disagree with our brothers and sisters. Our consciences might be slightly different so that we land in a slightly different position.

But if that's the case, then we need to remember as well that we're not meant to do this alone. Remember, after all, that we're subjected to authorities as a church as well, or as a family, as a Christian community.

So sometimes this discernment needs to be done together as a church because we need to act together, don't we? For our actions, what I do may impact my brother or sister in Christ.

So for instance, take this example of not being able to gather in church during the lockdown. If you're a member of Holy Trinity, Doncaster, then you're not only subject to the state government, which has made all these rules, but you're also subject to the vicar here, Andrew Price, of HTD, and ultimately to the Archbishop as well.

And so while you may have your views about what you think is the right thing to do, being part of this church means deferring to those other authorities as well.

[20 : 50] And so at HTD, we've allowed people to share their concerns about what they think ought to happen, but at the end of the day, the church leadership has made a decision and we've decided that we will comply.

Now if you as an individual that is fine, that that's just too much for your own conscience and you feel you can't be answerable to God in clear conscience by doing what the church has decided to do, then I think the decision there is that instead of rebelling against the church, then perhaps you need to find another Christian community that you can find peace with, with whatever decision they've made, that allows you to live with your conscience clear.

That's a sad thing to say because we don't want to ask people to leave the church, but if that's how strongly you feel, then in order to be able to be subject to authorities, that may be the way to find a

solution through it.

As for this specific issue of the way we do church at the moment in lockdown, as a church, we've really tried hard, haven't we, to work out the maximum overlap between complying with the rules of the government and still obeying God?

We know that the Bible has encouraged us in Hebrews not to give up meeting together, and then on, you know, at first glance, that may think, oh, then that means there's no other way but for us to defy the government in these rules.

[22 : 20] But no, we've tried hard, haven't we, to try and see if we can make the principle of Hebrews gathering together work, even whilst being subject to the rules of the authority.

And so we decided that the aim of gathering is to encourage us to love and good deeds, as Hebrews says. And thankfully, given the technology of Zoom and live streaming, we're able to do that.

In fact, the churches in Melbourne have worked really hard with the Department of Health to try and negotiate a way whereby even though we're in a lockdown, there's a minimum number of people that's allowed to come to church in order to enable this live streaming to work.

Now, you may think that the state government has a secret agenda to shut down churches and take away our religious liberties. I don't personally think they do. But even if you do that, if you do think like that, that's not the point, is it?

Because we're to try our best to be subject to those authorities and their restrictions whilst at the same time still being able to, in good conscience, obey God and do what He wants.

[23 : 29] and what we've come up with, this live streaming and Zooming, that's not optimal for us, is it? It's to our inconvenience, it's unnatural, we don't like it and yet, we go out of a way to do that in order to be subject to the authorities.

authorities. And so we keep working hard at this, live streaming and then talking over Zoom and praying together because we want to honour God by being subject to the authorities, even whilst we want to keep praying and doing God's word together, building one another up so that we can obey Him in the way Hebrews encourages us to keep meeting together.

Now of course, there may come a time that we have no choice but to disobey. And so the third principle we have to then apply is that we then have to accept the consequences of that disobedience, of the authorities, not of God.

So you see, that's what happens with the apostles in the book of Acts. They were prepared to disobey the authorities in order to keep preaching the gospel but what they accepted was that they would then have to be sent to jail.

And it's the same now for many pastors in China. Many have been told that they need to get government approval for their teaching. And so when they refuse, they accept jail as a result.

[24 : 51] And so likewise, if we'll ever have to disobey, we need to then be prepared to be wrongly punished. Paul's instructions here doesn't promise that those who do right will be immediately rewarded.

He only warns that those who do wrong should rightly fear punishment. But he does say that if we do right, then we have nothing to fear. We don't have to fear the authorities, but instead, we can simply entrust ourselves to God's sovereignty.

You see, knowing that all authorities are established by God is ultimately a great comfort, isn't it? Because if they are, then they are still under God's sovereign control, aren't they?

These authorities, no matter how evil they may be, cannot do more than what God allows them. And God will never allow them to do more than what He knows is good for us.

If you remember a few chapters ago in Romans 8, verse 28, Paul says, For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

[26 : 07] And then again in verse 37, No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any past, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so, if we are subject to authorities in obedience to God and offer ourselves as living sacrifices in true and proper worship to God, then we know that God will work for our good.

Even though that good may include suffering, He will not allow anything, no power on earth or in heaven to come between us and His love.

And so, we have nothing to fear. We can look forward to His condemnation instead. Let's pray.

Father, give us the strength and courage to submit ourselves to all authority.

We know that You have put them in place for our good. Teach us to honour and respect them even when we know that what they are doing is wrong. And even if we have to suffer for doing right, please help us not to fear, but to trust that You will vindicate us.

[27 : 32] that we will have Your commendation just as You have given Your Son, Jesus, for doing what's right. In His name we pray. Amen.