

Fruit of the Gospel - Submission

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- [0 : 0 0] Ambulance officers, firefighters, nurses, scientists, they've got it.
- Oh, and the Wiggles. Car salesmen, journalists, telemarketers don't have very much of it at all. But politicians, particularly government ministers, well, they've got hardly any.
- What am I talking about? Well, if you get something to do with respect or trust, then you'd be right. Research over the last few years shows that Australians tend to place their trust in those who work to save us in our hour of need.
- And that includes the Wiggles if you're a parent of a toddler, I think. But the same research shows that we're not all keen on those who have authority to lead.
- We're not trusting of those who govern us or keep order in our land. For Australians, that's primarily politicians. But in other countries like Japan and Russia, the military and the police are included in those not to be trusted.
- [1 : 2 6] And let's face it. Sometimes politicians are hard to trust. We hear promise after promise and we're in an election year. But sometimes after the election, it can feel like it was a bit of a con.
- If you're here at the Trinity Lectures during the week, you would have heard stories about how the Australian government seems to have, at various times, used issues like immigration, refugees, terrorism, more for their political mileage than for anything else.
- And in the global scheme of things, Australian politicians are angels. I mean, what about places in the world mentioned already where government is corrupt, violent, racist, sexist, downright dangerous?
- I'm thinking of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe. I'm thinking of Afghanistan under the Taliban. Of Yugoslavia, former Yugoslavia under Slobodan Milosevic.
- Who could respect leaders like those? And yet this is exactly what Romans 13 seems to be telling us to do.
- [2 : 5 1] To submit to the governing authorities, to respect them, to pay honour, to do what they say or face the consequences. Well, what would lead the Apostle Paul to start talking about the government in this great gospel book of Romans?
- I think there are a few reasons in the text itself. If you want to have that open, it's on page 923. And there are some reasons in their social context, the world in which the Roman Christians lived.
- Most broadly in the text, we've seen already in Lisa and Jordan sermons that Romans 12 begins, therefore, in view of God's mercy, and then goes on to outline the way Christians ought to live in view of the gospel, that they've been saved by this powerful gospel, and so they ought to live gospel lives.
- And so now God, through Paul, in these chapters and following, is revealing how the gospel ought to transform the way we relate to the world, to each other, as human beings, as fellow Christians, as weak and strong Christians, to non-believers, and now here, to the state, to the government.

Having a right relationship to the government is an essential part of living out our faith in the world. And quite frankly, given the amount of space the government and politics get in the media and the amount of energy that it actually takes up, even if you're in a democracy, it would be odd and amiss if Paul didn't talk about how we're to live out our gospel in relation to the state.

[4 : 42] More specifically in the text, though, Romans 12 has already brought up two principles for the gospel life. Firstly, that Christians ought not to be conformed to the pattern of the world.

And secondly, that they ought not to take revenge, but leave God to punish wrong. Now, if you think about it, if the Roman Christians were to meditate on these two principles and to apply them, perhaps without further explanation from Paul, it's possible that they might apply them wrongly to their relationship with the state, to the government.

Applying the first principle, not being conformed to the world, they might see that call as meaning that they can live above the law of the land, that they've got freedom to rebel, to refuse to conform to the rules of society.

I mean, we see in another letter like 1 Corinthians, that kind of freedom taken to its extreme. We're above this. We can do what we like. Applying the second principle, they might question why the state should be allowed to punish wrong.

Why they wield the sword if it is God who should be executing judgment and will do so on the last day. And so they might think, well, all consequences should be postponed until then.

[6 : 21] And the laws of the land, again, ought not apply to God's people. Well, we are so familiar with this text that we think, well, that'd be very strange.

But it's not impossible that this new radical society might begin to think this way. And so Paul knows that not only would such an application of his teaching in Romans 12 be mistaken, but it would also be disastrous for the Roman Christians for their mission of sharing the gospel in the world.

We know that the Jews were expelled from Rome in about AD 49 by the Emperor Claudius. And we think it's possibly due to conflict over Christianity or because of other revolutionary movements within Judaism.

Christianity was already looked on with suspicion in Paul's day. And so he's absolutely insistent that Christians ought not give any more excuse to the government to act against them.

And so you might remember in 1 Timothy chapter 2, Paul urges prayers and intercessions to be made for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

[7 : 49] And the Apostle Peter in his first letter gives actually really similar exhortations to that which we have from Paul in Romans 13. But he gives as his reason for accepting the authority of every human institution, that it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.

Christians ought to be exemplary citizens, say the Apostles, because in this way they will commend the gospel and they will have greater opportunity to spread it and live it out.

But if they don't, as one writer has said, no good will come to the cause of the gospel by followers of Jesus being regarded as crazy dissidents who won't cooperate with the most basic social mechanisms.

And that's been true of Christians from time to time, or Christian groups from time to time across the centuries. But the fact is the good news that Jesus is the only Lord and Savior will cause enough offense by itself.

We don't need to add unnecessary conflict to our mission by being troublemakers, Paul is saying. But, interestingly, when we look at this passage, it's not actually preventative or pragmatic reasons that Paul gives when he starts to exhort the Roman Christians to be subject to the governing authorities.

[9 : 31] No, he begins with a theological reason, that the authority of the government comes from God. Have a look with me at verses 1 and 2 of Romans chapter 13.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. There's a powerful theological truth here, isn't there?

God is the only true authority in the universe. And so if God is the only true authority in the universe, all earthly authority is simply a gift from him.

It's on loan from him, if you like. Remember Jesus saying to Pilate in John chapter 19, you would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.

[10 : 44] God is in control of all things. Jesus is saying, Paul is saying. He is completely sovereign even over rulers, governments, non-Christian, Christian alike.

And as creator of the universe, any authority given to anybody, anything, rulers, referees of basketball, parents, it's simply a loan of his authority.

If you think about it, this statement is actually far more shocking to national leaders than it is to Christians. Christians know already that God is in control.

They know the truth that he deposes kings and sets up kings, as it says in Daniel chapter 2. And this truth is of great comfort to us.

We remind ourselves of it often. But yet throughout the ages, rulers have fallen again and again into the trap of believing that the authority that they've got over their subjects is theirs by right, theirs alone.

[12 : 04] It comes from something inherent within them, or even that they have divine powers. Think of King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel with his pride when he surveys Babylon and with his massive statue and of his edict that all should bow down and worship him in this statue.

Well, you might be familiar with the claim that every Roman emperor made to be divine, to be God on earth.

That for Christians to call Jesus Lord and God, we know, we've heard that this is a political statement as much as it is a theological one in that context, challenging the self-appointed authority, the self-claimed right to power of Caesar.

And so this chapter actually begins by challenging that authority again. The authority of leaders to tell people what to do is actually God's authority.

And so it's incumbent upon them to lead us as God would have them lead us and be humble under his ultimate rule. Rulers should realize that they're actually God's servants.

[13 : 30] And that's what he says in verse 4. And he uses this word minister, like the same word that you would use of a minister standing up the front in church. Government leaders are God's servants to do his work.

And so they should be doing it in his way. Well, I think Christian leaders over the centuries have taken that to heart and have really tried to do their best in being humble.

But can you imagine how a Roman emperor get their hands on this letter, read this, how would they feel?

It's very challenging. Imagine how it would have gone down in Saddam Hussein's palace in front of his great big statue, in his courts, in his war room.

This is a great challenge before it kind of stirs us up to think, oh, how do I submit? It's actually a great challenge first and foremost to those in authority. But for Christian citizens, everyday folk, Paul's not simply reiterating here that God is in control, but he wants us to know that God has designed the earth to have rulers so that society may be ordered and just and for our good.

[14 : 53] And because it's his authority, as we've said, that lies behind such law and order, that's why we must submit. Because it's God's authority and it's for our good.

Even before the Israelites had a king, God had given instructions for the ordering of society by leaders. And then later, I guess, when there was a greater division kind of between church and state, for want of a better term, it was still God's desire that order should come to the land through a king for the good of the people.

Even under a foreign emperor, the Christians ought to submit, Paul is saying, to the ordering of society because God wants the world to run this way for its good.

To resist those who govern society is to resist God's plan for his creation and his authority. And, to resist law and order is foolish and immoral because law and order, in its best sense, is designed not simply to reflect civic duties and prevent anarchy, but to reflect moral absolutes, to reflect good and bad in what it legislates, as we see as we go on into verses 3 and 4.

Have a look with me. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good and you will receive its approval.

[16 : 26] For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain.

It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Let me ask you a question. When you look in your rearview mirror and you see a police car, does your heart start to beat faster?

Do you immediately look down to your speedo and go, what was I going? Maybe it's just me. But what happens when I see that I was only going 60 in a 60 zone?

I relax. It's okay. I know I was obeying the speed limit. I'm not in danger. They're not after me this time.

Or, if you're in business, what happens when you hear the word audit? Oh, if you know you haven't been cooking the books or taking little shortcuts here and there, you know you have nothing to worry about.

[17 : 37] But if you have, then you know that the government does not bear the sword, or in our nation, the fine, the jail sentence, in vain.

Now, mentioning the sword, I don't think that this verse is teaching on whether Christians ought to support the concept of the death penalty or not.

But I think it is just saying, well, the fact is, in Paul's day, they clearly did use capital punishment and God allowed those rulers the right to use that.

the point is that the authority of the government and their right to punish or approve in whatever way is of no fear for those who are doing good because they won't be penalized, they won't be punished, they have the peace of knowing that not only are they in submission to the civic law, the law of the land, they are acting in accordance with God's law because, in general, the law should be legislating according to moral absolutes.

So, then, Paul writes in verse 5, therefore, one must be subject not only because of wrath, fear of punishment, but also because of conscience.

[19 : 04] Those who submit to authority have a quiet conscience, Paul says, because they know that when they obey, they're actually living the way God intended.

But, just in case we might want to try and force our conscience to be quiet and justify certain types of dodgy dealings because they don't strictly come under the Ten Commandments, you know, they're not stealing or murdering exactly.

Paul then gives an example of something which one could very easily be tempted to cheat on and one that is timely for us not long after the end of the financial year for those of us still needing to do their taxes.

Whether or not the Roman church that Paul's writing to actually had a particular issue with this, we don't know, but taxes would have been a hot topic for anyone living in Rome.

And Christians wouldn't have been immune from the desire to get out of paying what would have seemed to them to be unduly heavy taxes. Apparently, excuse me, they had a couple of two different sorts of taxes and they were quite heavy and they were often augmented by, as we have heard from the gospels, corrupt tax collectors who added a little on the top for their own pockets.

[20 : 40] But Paul wants Christians to be absolutely blameless, even when they think a system like this might be unfair or the taxes are too much, so that they have nothing on their conscience and no reason for rebuke.

So he says in verse 6 and 7, for the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing.

Pay to all what is due them, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

I remember last year going to a tax accountant for the first time, first time I'd ever had a full-time wage, so it was a weird experience because they want to help you kind of get the most back on your tax but they kind of leave it up to you in the areas where you don't need receipts to just go with your own conscience about how much you're going to say you spent on this and estimate how much this was worth and how much depreciation this thing had.

It's quite a temptation. I remember sitting there seeing the guy enter all the fees on mine Phil's joint bank account as a deduction for me knowing that he would have entered some of those fees on Phil's tax return as well as a deduction and I sat there thinking should I say something?

[22 : 17] This seems like double dipping and I mean it wasn't much and well it probably wouldn't have made much difference but I had to say something because even in the seeming insignificant decisions these tiny little ones who knows what it would have amounted to but God through Paul in this passage is saying to us we've got to make sure that we do the right thing and that we honour the government with our taxes so not only are we not being deceitful not doing wrong and making sure we don't incur the wrath but we are honouring God's servant for our good by giving us taxes and for ourselves we get a clear conscience so he says don't withhold tax from the government even if you think it's too much

God will deal with them about that he's got it in hand give to Caesar what is Caesar's as Jesus said and if you think it's not rightfully Caesar's there are ways that you can address that in the law now I hope that you've picked up the fact that Paul is speaking in the most general and kind of ideal straightforward way in these verses he's not giving a comprehensive but what if treaties on world politics and Christian political involvement and public disobedience and all of that kind of stuff but before we move to any but what if that Jono so helpfully raised for us at the beginning of the service we've got to remember that Paul's government was by no means ideal he's not writing this in the context of having it all good and then we get it in our time where things aren't so good and we go well this can't apply to us the original

Christians reading this letter had already experienced significant persecution and more would be to come under Nero and later immorality such as homosexuality gluttony pedophilia idolatry was sanctioned in public life and yes Paul says the ruler doesn't bear the sword in vain but even earlier in this chapter in Romans chapter 8 he's already spoken of that same sword being used to martyr Christians Romans 8:35 who will separate us from the love of Christ will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword Paul himself had undergone much at the hands of the government for being a Christian he'd be eventually imprisoned for his faith and others of his brothers in the apostolic work would be cruelly martyred this was not a governing authority to which it would have been easy to submit and yet

Paul exhorts submission so we can't just dismiss his words whenever we feel that our government doesn't measure up but what if the government is asking us to do things that are against God's will what if the government refuses to let us meet together as Christians what if they burn down churches what if they allow Christian women to be raped or mutilated without any punishment for the offenders what if they outlaw parents spanking children what if they mandate adherence to one religion what if they kill six million Jews what if they secretly torture terrorists what if they decriminalize abortion what if they detain refugees indefinitely what if well the first thing to say is that in our country where we are governed by democracy there are actually many many legally sanctioned submissive means to influence our government and to disagree with our leaders and seek to change the law and we often don't use these to their fullest potential we can encourage

Christians into politics this year is the big Wilberforce year and Wilberforce himself was thinking about whether he should become a minister a clergy person but his friends in the Clapham sect said no go into politics you can make a difference and we know he did with the eventual abolition of slavery if we feel called or gifted for politics we can seek that vocation we can vote thoughtfully and prayerfully we can lobby and letter write most politicians I think really do want to represent the people and if they don't hear from Christians then they will represent the loudest voice that they do hear whether that be the gay lobby or the secular feminist lobby or whatever

[28:17] I wrote my first email to a politician this year about abortion issues and I cc'd it to a number of senators as well and I was pleasantly surprised when I received a number of emails back just short ones but not like form letters thanking me for my input indicating that personally they either agreed with the points that I'd made or that they take it on board now I am a real political dum-dum and so if I can do it you can do it too let me assure you I did it through the Australian Christian Lobby website they you type in your post code and they show you who your local members of parliament are and give you a few points of what you could maybe say to them in your own words it's fantastic google Australian Christian lobby it's great I'm convinced that Christians could make a much greater difference lawfully submissively than they do currently if we would organise and inform ourselves

I remember a couple of years ago when the state government wanted to change the CRE laws in schools the policy that it would become instead of an opt out policy an opt in policy so parents would all have to make the conscious choice of saying yes I want my child to do RE and Christians were very concerned that that would actually drop off the numbers significantly of children being exposed to great Christian education and so they lobbied and submitted and wrote to the government and apparently the government received thousands and thousands of submissions from Christians saying don't change it keep it as an opt out and they received something like seven letters from those saying no make it an opt in and so it remains an opt out policy and hundreds of thousands of young kids get to hear the gospel because

Christians lobbied it's great really great and internationally there are ways that we can advocate and agitate through different groups getting involved supporting writing letters all of that but what if there is no lawful way to disobey or disagree do God's people have the right to civil disobedience the Bible reports clearly that they do in the book of Daniel which I've already mentioned tonight we see Daniel and Shadrach Meshach and Abednego on two separate occasions disobeying the king's edict and facing the consequences Daniel to the lion's den and the three boys to the fiery furnace in Exodus we read of the Hebrew midwives defying Pharaoh's command to kill all the baby boys and we have

Moses surviving to lead the people out of bondage Peter and John continued to preach despite being ordered to be silent Paul and Barnabas kept sharing the gospel in prison even though that's why they were there in fact the book of Acts does give us a principle that I think most of us intuitively use to balance or filter how we read Romans 13 to obey God rather than man in other words if the law commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands then you must break the law let me say that again if the law commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands then you must break the law and I think we could add all the while respecting that there will be consequences that come from that because those in authority have God's authority we must accept those consequences willingly and that shows our submission even while we disobey even if that authority is being misused and I think our willingness to suffer for Christ will be honoured by

God and may indeed add to the impact of our actions as we seek to change society well we could say so much more on this topic and I won't but let me just add that any civil disobedience or protest must be done with a character with a heart that is shaped by the scriptures not violent not for selfish gain for material pleasure for wealth for pride for vanity but with compassion with prayer with thoughtfulness with strength and with courage chat to me afterwards if you want me to point you in the direction of some more resources you can read on that area if you're really interested but finally what can we do we can pray we can pray for ourselves that God will change our heart to recognize that he's in control he has a purpose that all authority is actually on loan from him to trust in him to support our government where they do good to have the courage and the energy and the discipline to lawfully dissent where that's needed and for courage to disobey when that's needed and we can pray for our government as we did earlier tonight and as we do so often we can pray for leaders around the world that they would indeed recognize that their authority is from

[34 : 44] God that they would rule in his way and that all might turn and see that the true God the true ruler the true king is Jesus Christ let's pray Lord our God would you change our heart so that we might seek the good of the land through submission to the authorities help us to be honest and right and good in all things we thank you that you work through the authorities to execute your judgment even on the earth and we pray for them as we've already done so tonight that you would grant them just and compassionate hearts direct them to your laws let them legislate what is your good we pray for our land we pray for Christians that they would have courage and discipline to involve themselves in politics so that we might lead quiet and peaceable lives so that we might share the gospel so that we might continue to be a shining light in a dark world we pray in Jesus name

Amen