

# God's Government

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Date: 07 July 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good, thank you. So we're actually going to talk this morning really about worshipping God.! So meet two Christians, Mark and Ellie. Mark says to Ellie, I had a great time in church on Sunday.

Ellie likes to shock, she's a little bit provocative, and she says to Mark, I agree, it was good in church on Sunday, wasn't it?

But you know what, I had a brilliant time of worship on Thursday. During the morning I was busy filling in my tax form, and in fact my worship went on as I popped into the polling station to vote at lunchtime, and my worship reached a fantastic climax when I slowed down and didn't break the speed limit on the way back home.

At which point Mark thinks Ellie's being a little bit too provocative on purpose, and he may be right, but she does have a point, because it is very tempting to live with a sacred, secular divide in our lives, as though over here there are God things, like Sunday, church, Bible reading, prayer, praise, spiritual things, worship, a private bit of life tucked away for us together with our God, one segment of life.

And then over here there is non-God things. The rest of the week, the world and politics and money and work and watching telly and driving, kind of all of life, all of the time public life, which kind of feels very separate from me and my God and losing myself in worship.

[ 1 : 55 ] That is life like an orange, if you like, split up into segments. There's the God bit, a little segment of orange or tangerine over here, the worship bit, and then the whole of everything else in your chocolate orange or whatever it is.

But the truth is to think about life like that is absolutely all wrong, because there is no sacred, secular divide in God's world, it's all his. And there can be no sacred, secular divide in our lives either.

It's not on the screen, but you've got your Bible in front of you. Just a page back from chapter 13, in chapter 12, verse 1, just flick back a page. Chapter 12, verse 1 is the headline verse that drives the latter chapters of the book of Romans.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, he's talking to Christian believers here, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. Paul says, devote yourselves totally to him. Your bodies as a living sacrifice. This is true and proper worship.

[ 3 : 08 ] It's very radical. Every day of your week for the whole of life, your desires and resources and time, in every relationship, every situation, all in committed to your God.

See, there is no divide here with worship, some of life, and not worship, the rest. And in Paul's letter, through chapters 12 and 13 and 14, Paul shows us how to live all of our lives, worshipping the God who rules all of life.

And it's in that context that he writes chapter 13 and verses 1 to 7, which is about government, taxes, speed limits, prisons and citizenship.

So you say, why write all that stuff about the state and life out there and public life and weekly life? It's here in the Bible because government itself and how we relate to our authorities in our society has everything to do with worshipping and serving God.

Okay, that's the introduction. Romans 13 doesn't tell us everything we want to know about government. It doesn't tell us who we should have voted for and so on, but it does tell us something of what we need to know and do.

[ 4 : 31 ] And the headline command is in verse 1. Do you see this? Romans 13, verse 1, let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. So by governing authorities, in our context, Paul is

talking about those who govern over us, the state, for us in the UK, are king and the elected government.

You see why we're looking at this this morning. Just as of a few days ago, we now have a new elected parliament, a new prime minister, Keir Starmer, and his government who will pass legislation.

There'll be new laws, there'll be changes in taxes and so on, a government. And the command in the Bible here, this radical document for those who follow Jesus, is be subject to them.

So Christian believer, recognise a right order in society, a hierarchy, and place yourselves under the governing authorities because they're in charge here.

Early pause. How does that feel to you? To be told in church to be subject to the government? My guess is, in our guts, quite a lot of us may think, I'm not too sure about that, actually, submit to the government.

[ 5 : 53 ] You might think that because you don't think much of today's politicians. They're all as bad as each other, lots of people say. Or, some Christians sometimes think, ugh, all that stuff out there in the world, it's bad, and it's the world, and I live for heaven now, and I'm just not interested in the governing authorities.

Maybe, though, it doesn't feel good to be told to be subject to them because, actually, we live in a culture and we often have hearts that quite often rail against placing yourselves under authority. We're pretty anti-authority. I want to be me. I want to be free. I want to do what I want. I don't want anybody telling me what to do. Which is the kind of attitude, of course, that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve and God.

I won't fall in line. I'm no weak-willed conformer. Or even if some of us aren't actually much like that, we sometimes secretly want to be.

Why should I do what other people say? But Paul says, no. So on the back of Thursday's general election, whether you voted Labour or you're a convinced Tory or reformed voter, as the new government legislate and govern, gladly, willingly, keep the law and pay the taxes you owe and be a submissive, respectful citizen.

[ 7 : 31 ] To which we rightly want to ask, why? Why should I do that? What right has the government to tell me what to do? And in fact, what's it got to do with being a Christian and worshipping God?

Well, let's go on in these verses. Let's look at this, verses 1 and 2. Be subject to the governing authorities because they've been established by God, Paul says.

That is, government in general and the government we have right now, God's idea, God's choice, put in place to rule by him and for him.

Paul really wants us to understand this. Look, 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. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

[ 8 : 35 ] He's really underlining this three times. God has established, established by God, God has instituted. Which says to us, did you know this, that governments are not a bad human idea but God's decision, his plan for society and authorities in our world, not a bad thing, not a man-made power grab but God-given and from him.

And more than that, the authorities that exist that are in power today have been established, the word is appointed by God. that is, those people in power today are his appointment and his servants.

Paul is not talking here about Christian-ish governments appointed by him. Nero was the emperor when Paul was writing Romans, Nero who will go on and terrorise Christians.

When Jesus is standing trial before Pontius Pilate who will hand him over to be crucified, he says to him in John's Gospel, you would have no power, Pontius Pilate, over me if it were not given to you from above.

They are given power. So we're not talking about Christian-ish governments nor is Paul saying anything here about how governments come to power.

[ 10 : 07 ] A democratic election, force of arms, inherited rule. No, just simply, straightforwardly, across the board are governing authorities the ones we have today established by God.

And that is why, verse 2, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and those who will do so bring judgment on themselves.

How could I rebel against the authorities God has put in place? because if I did that, I'd be rebelling against him. Okay, so what do you make of that?

What do you make of that when we look around at the mess and the manipulation of elections and the comments of candidates? we're not naive.

We understand how it works in countries like ours. Or, maybe a bit more seriously, what do you do with this kind of teaching when you see and experience the deep wrongs that authorities commit?

[11:18] and when you see sometimes the proud godlessness of governments, it's tempting to wonder if God has anything at all to do with any of it, let alone the running of things.

And yet, the straight truth is our God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and he is absolutely in charge of history and he appoints rulers and that is a good thing because as one person has written, behind the apparent mess of human power structures, there rules a God of order.

That is how it is in our world. Back in the Old Testament in the 500s BC, the most powerful ruler in the world was Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

He was a proud, godless, self-made ruler. So he thought until the God of heaven took him and humbled him and pressed upon him this message in Daniel chapter 4.

The most high is sovereign over all the kingdoms on earth and he gives them to anyone he wishes. It's God's choice put in place to rule by him, his servants for him.

[12:33] Even when our governing authorities deny his existence. If you're British and oldish, you might remember back in 2003, 20 years ago, Tony Blair's Director of Communications, Alistair Campbell, declared, we don't do God.

Keir Starmer, our new Prime Minister, is a very open atheist. First time there's been someone who has said that so very clearly, who's been our Prime Minister for a number of years.

And you probably know that any mention in the UK, any little mention of God by any politician is a vote loser. you don't do it. And yet, do you see the world like this?

Under the sovereign rule of heaven, our government is God's appointment. Come to a second reason to submit ourselves to the governing authorities.

In verse 3, be subject to the governing authorities secondly, because they're God's servants. for our good. So let's read from verse 3 now and the purpose of government, why God sets rulers over us.

[13:50] Look, for rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended.

For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Do you notice this again in these verses? Those in authority, verse 4, God's servants. God's servants. the word is deacon or servant or minister. Like in brackets, we should pray that our rulers would know that.

Keir Starmer, Joe Biden, Kim Jong-un, Marine Le Pen, maybe, Xi Jinping. Whether you acknowledge him or not, as you wield great power, you sit under authority and you rulers, you will answer to the God of heaven.

You are not top dog, he is, and you will face him as judge. Do you pray that for our rulers? We should do. Because they are God's servants and their job is to commend right and punish wrong, to promote good and restrain evil.

[15:15] In verse 3, if you want to be free from the one in authority, then do what is right and you'll be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. In this country, to some degree, the honours system has been an attempt to do this, a good thing, where those who serve their society well and do what's right, you should be praised by those in authority.

The honours system is wonderful. You get an OBE or a CBE or whatever it is. Praise from God through his servant for the good you have done in society. On the other hand, though, verse 4, do you see?

If you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. That is, as God's servants, the government has a God-given mandate to punish those who do wrong.

It means for us, by the way, personally, that when crimes are committed against us, personal revenge is not an option. We're not to take the law into our own hands.

And that is because it's God's job to repay. And our God punishes wrongdoing in part now through his servants. They bear the sword to administer his justice through our legal systems and courts and prisons.

[16:49] Now, in a moment, we should say, well, what happens when rulers are godless and reject God? What happens when rulers terrorise those who do right and promote wrong? But before that, I'd have thought we should recognise in our country to hear what a huge blessing it is from God to live under a fairly stable and reasonably just government.

government. And that is his gift. It's his common grace to us. In the UK, for the most part, we're a million miles away from anarchy. And I think we probably take it for granted.

Most of us in the UK know very little of the paralysing fear that those in other parts of the world endure, where authorities are corrupt and civil order breaks down and it's the law of the jungle.

and any kind of transition to another presidency or something like that will see court cases and battles rather than Rishi Sunak simply saying, I lost and I wish the next man well.

This is a good thing in our country to give thanks for. And we have authority set over us to act as his servants, to commend right and punish wrong.

[18:04] It's a huge blessing from God. And a second reason why to keep the laws, that we might be commended, that we might not be punished by God through his servants.

Okay, we're getting to the point with this passage to applying it to ourselves, but let's just pause and ask the question that's been hanging a bit, which is, what do we do when our governing authorities step out from under God and refuse to govern according to God's ways?

What should Christians do when a government terrorises those who do right and promotes wrong?

There's all sorts we could say, but let's just start with this just very simply, that if as Christian citizens we're faced with an obvious face-to-face clash, obedience to the governing authorities or obedience to God, if it is that clear cut, then at the end of the day we must obey God for he comes first.

In Acts chapters 4 and 5 we looked at this a little while back, the apostles were teaching publicly that Jesus is Lord and only he can save and they were commanded by the authorities stop and their answer in Acts 5, 29, we must obey God rather than human beings.

So humbly, boldly, they prayed, they thought clearly and knowing the consequences before them, they obeyed God. And so, in this context, in the UK right now, if and when in the name of tolerance the government says you must not teach publicly that Jesus is Lord and only he can save, then humbly and boldly we will disobey.

[20:03] We will disobey. If and when in the name of tolerance the government says we must actively promote and celebrate all sexual and gender lifestyle choices, then humbly and boldly, following God's word, we will disobey and face the consequences.

If the government commands what God forbids, we won't go along with that. If the government forbids what God commands, we won't go along with that. Always, always, with eyes wide open, we obey God and we must stand up and be counted.

And there's lots, lots more to say in that area and issues to explore. We won't do that this morning because actually for most of us, most of the time, I think this passage should bite just in a very simple and straightforward way.

And Paul's argument in verses 1 to 4, he sums up here in verse 5, do you see? Therefore, it's necessary to submit to the authorities not only because of possible punishment, verses 3 to 4, but also as a matter of conscience because they've been established by God, verses 1 and 2.

So here we go as we draw to a close. We're talking this morning about worshipping God. Step up out of Romans 13 for a moment. Remember Romans 12, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

[21:44] We're talking as those who've put our faith in Jesus about living all of our lives, worshipping the God who rules all of life. And Paul says, this is what it looks like, and it may not feel very exciting, but it is super spiritual, this.

You put yourself under the government because they're God's government and his servants. So how could you and I worship God this week?

Where will this bite? Question one, will we gladly keep the laws of the land? Or will we rebel against God?

Wonderfully, what a blessing here. Lots of our laws in our country are based squarely on God's revelation. and we continue to have a Christian heritage and God's moral laws, his natural law written into our legal system.

Lies, slander and libel are wrong. It's because God says that. Theft and murder and bodily harm. Will we obey God and keep the law of the land?

[ 22 : 56 ] Or else? Will we? Well, for sure we might say, maybe that's not a problem. I will very much do my best not to steal or murder or commit ABH or something like that.

I don't know whether you think the 20 mile an hour speed limit up the Arbery Road seems quite slow some of the time if you're a driver. But the authorities have decided that that is what's best. Because when you get hit by a car doing 30, it causes a lot more damage and they think there's a risk of that. So when you're driving up the Arbery Road or wherever, will you worship God with your right foot?

Or will you rebel against him? Like we want to worship our God, surely. So we will submit. It's not going to cause me any problems if I get home two minutes later in the big scheme of things. We won't ignore parking restrictions. We won't try to bypass planning laws. We won't ignore copyright. We won't download things illegally. We won't smoke weed even though they don't seem to prosecute these days.

[ 24 : 08 ] We won't try to be super clever this week or this month. Hey, no one will notice. No one really cares. Everyone else is doing it. We won't get caught. No, no.

We will do everything we can to keep the laws of the land from the heart and gladly in order to worship our God, Paul says. But not just keeping the law because verses 6 and 7 bring a little bit more application.

Look, this is also why you pay taxes. For the authorities are God's servants who give their full time to governing. Here is our God-given worship reason to pay taxes.

So, verse 7, give to everyone what you owe them. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. And so we should. There'll be a few of us who for some reason fill in a tax return.

Will you do it with 100% honesty? You'll be worshipping God as you do. If you do work for cash in hand, will you hide it away?

[ 25 : 17 ] Or will you rightly pay the tax you should owe on it? That is worship. And not grudging worship. Like, I gladly give what I owe so that God's servants can carry out their God-given job.

At the end of verse 7, a couple more things we owe. If respect, then respect. If honour, then honour. Because they, the governing authorities, are not just human beings like us, made in the image of God.

They are also in authority. I don't know what you're like as a person, just as we end. Some of us like to fit in and conform and always do what's right.

We've grown up like that. Some of us are free people. We love to do what we want and we always want to push the boundaries. But whether you're a fit-in conformer or a get-away-from-me- or want to live free.

This is the command of God to us. If we owe respect, then respect. If we owe honour, then honour because of the God who made us. I wonder if you'll be tempted in these coming years to mock and laugh at the governing authorities.

[ 26 : 30 ] Like maybe you're pro-labour and you're really happy that they've got in and you think it's going to be a great start. It might be. It may well be in a couple of years' time that most people in the country are mocking and laughing at the next set of politicians.

Will we join in the easy cynicism and banter? Or instead, this week and in our lives, will we honour the King and his ministers and will we pray for them?

Because when we do all this, when we're Christians and we know God's mercy and we say, we'll obey your commands and we'll seek to worship you.

And so we'll submit to the governing authorities and pay our taxes and not mock and pray and obey God and do what is right. When we go out into our world and our weak and we live as submissive, godly citizens in our world, very simply, our God is pleased and that is our spiritual act of worship. So let me lead us in a prayer on the back of Romans 13 and then we'll continue praying.

[ 27 : 49 ] Almighty God, we thank you that you are King and Lord of all. You're the sovereign over our country and over the world. God, thank you that the authorities that exist, whether good in our eyes or bad or in absolute terms good or bad, they have been established by you.

Please would you make us citizens who obey you and love you and worship you and do so by finding our place as submissive citizens within the society that you've placed us.

Help us to do what is right. Help us to pay revenue and respect and honour. Please sharpen our thinking, our decision-making that we might always obey you first, our God.

please grow in us, we pray, and the desire to love and obey you by living in the world in a way that's right.

And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.