

WEEK 3

Submission: A Christian Response to Government

INTRODUCTION

A church in Phoenix, Arizona has a ministry to the homeless. Every Sunday the church has a breakfast with sausage, pancakes, and eggs offered during the morning service, and it seems more than 100 people who are homeless attend.

Legitimate concerns soon arose. Neighbors questioned the church about its breakfast ministry, and city officials soon followed. Everyone expressed appreciation for helping the homeless, but they encouraged the church to stop busing homeless people into their neighborhood. *Why not feed the homeless where they reside?*

The church refused to modify its ministry and challenged the city with a lawsuit. The city would not back down. Officials maintained that zoning ordinances prevent churches in residential areas from acting as charity dining halls. Though the two parties reached a settlement, was this really a battle the church needed to fight?

QUESTION: Rebellion or contempt towards authority is common to man, even among Christians. In what ways do you struggle to submit to the authorities in your life (ex: employer, spouse, church elders, elected officials)?

The first Christians were Jews who had grown up despising Rome's occupation of Israel. As Christianity rapidly spread among the Gentiles, Christian beliefs became known and mocked. Paul wrote Romans in this environment (mid-50's A.D.) as the government was beginning to notice Christians. First Peter, however, was written a decade later when the government's disdain for Christians had erupted into "fiery trials" (1 Pet 4:12). Regardless of the environment, both apostles gave the same exhortation: _____.

Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 are foundational texts regarding a believer's attitude towards civil authorities.

I. Romans 13:1-7

“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. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”

— *Romans 13:1-7*

Scripture exhorts submission to governing authorities and then provides two concrete reasons. The first is theological: _____. The second reason is practical: “Good conduct” or submission doesn’t provoke the authorities to punish you.

“Be Subject” (v. 1a)

WHY?

- “for there is no authority except from God” (v. 1b) *Theological*
- “for rulers are not a terror to good conduct” (v. 3a) *Practical*

A government can persecute anyone, but they *normally* do not devote revenue to persecute a law-abiding citizen. Emperor Trajan expressed this as a policy when he explained it is a waste of revenue to persecute Christians (110 A.D.). Moreover, Paul encourages us not to view government _____, because “rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.”

QUESTION: If God establishes all authority, how should this impact the ways we talk about leaders on the both sides of the political aisle?

Notice the phrases Romans 13 uses to describe political leaders:

- “Instituted by God.”
“What God has appointed.” } *Refers to people, not government in a general sense*
- _____
- _____ *See also Isaiah 10:5-6*
- _____

QUESTION: It is easy to harbor a negative view of government. How does this square with Paul’s view of government, which was rather positive?

““ *It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Romans 13:1–7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning.*
— Douglas Moo

Romans 13:5-6 summarizes what has already been said, but verse 7 culminates with a specific application: Submission involves _____.

During the first decade of this century, the IRS estimated that the United States had lost approximately \$3.1 trillion dollars due to tax evasion. It isn’t hard to cheat on your taxes, even to feel it’s justified. First-century Christians wrestled with the temptation, too. These verses, however, teach us that government officials are some of God’s agents/ministers. To cheat them is to cheat the One who appointed them.

QUESTION: Romans 12:1-2 sets the broader context for chapters 12-15. How does submitting to earthly authorities relate to being a “living sacrifice” unto God?

II. 1 Peter 2:13-17

“Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”

— 1 Peter 2:13-17

Peter wrote soon after Rome had burned to ash. Nero blamed Christians for the fire and fanned the fury of his people against the church. Peter, like Paul, exhorted believers not to react or return evil with evil. Instead, continue to submit to the authorities.

“Be Subject” (v. 13)

WHY?

→ _____ (v. 15a)

WHAT MIGHT RESULT?

→ “you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (v. 15b)

Submission is God’s will, but Peter also wants us to see that submission is proactive. More than obeying the law, submission involves “doing good” to those in positions of authority. Thus, a submissive spirit _____.

“*Government is more than a nuisance to be put up with; it is an institution established by God to accomplish some of His purposes on earth.*


— Douglas Moo


QUESTION: Peter connects submission to living “as people who are free.” How might an insubordinate, rebellious spirit actually enslave you?

Submitting to a good leader is easy and says little about your faith. When we yield ourselves to poor leaders, even striving to bless them, our conduct may “silence the ignorance of foolish people.” More literally, submission places a “muzzle” upon the ignorant. It leaves the world with nothing negative to say against us.

Be encouraged that God may use your submissive spirit to convict those who see it and bring them to salvation (1 Pet 2:12).

Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 end on a tough note. The apostles knew that believers resented their authorities and sometimes refused to pay taxes. So, what does submission look like?

Paul  _____.

Peter  _____.

QUESTION: Submission is not a synonym for obedience. However, as you reflect upon this study, how would you define submission?

As we conclude this study, look at Acts 23:1-5. While on trial, Paul insulted Ananias, the High Priest. Paul’s response is instructive for us, because rather than double-down on the insult he quickly confessed his sin—he had just spoken “evil of a ruler.” May we take this to heart, meditate upon this study and repent as needed. May we consider how to honor our leaders today.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- God is the source of all authority. How we treat our authorities directly honors or dishonors the God who established each of them.
- Submission to secular authority is an act of spiritual worship.
- “Be subject... for the Lord’s sake” indicates that submission isn’t a reward given to those who seem worthy. Whether the authority is honorable or dishonorable, we are called to a life of submission to our authorities.
- The worse the authority over us, greater is the opportunity to exalt Christ.