



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Good Living in Hard Times

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Romans 13:1-7

Clint Pressley

13 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. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ 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.

(Pastor prays)

What a great passage that I hope will be medicine for your soul and a joy for your future. Because if we aren't careful, we can get caught up in *this* world, forgetting that we are citizens of the *next* world. Whatever tensions we lived with in 2019 have been intensified and aggravated in 2020. We have racial animosity, election-year bombast, a worldwide pandemic followed by sharp disagreements about how to handle it. We have anxiety about the future and frustrations about the present that have put us on edge. And God in His greatness has landed us here in Romans 13. And if you will think about it deeply with me, you will see that what Paul writes here is remarkable, especially when you take into account the political situation he lived in. There are no Christians in government when Paul writes this. In fact, a short time before Paul wrote this, Jews were kicked out of Rome because of a leader named Chrestus and some

think they could have been Christians. And when Paul wrote this letter, Jews and Christians hadn't been back in Rome very long. Their situation in Rome was tenuous at best.

In addition to that, Roman Christians would live under some of history's most depraved leaders the likes of Nero and Caligula and Tacitus. I mean from the times of Jesus, the government was tacitly responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, and in Rome Christians would suffer at the "circus maximus" being fed to lions and killed for sport by gladiators. And yet, Paul writes this chapter to minister to the church at Rome and remind them, never forget you are part of a higher holier kingdom. You serve a King who loves His people so much that He sent His son Jesus to die on the cross for His people. And the way you join his kingdom is by grace through faith in Jesus.

Take this passage to heart, brothers and sisters. Let it be medicine to your soul as we live our lives here for the glory of the Lord Jesus. In this passage, Paul gives one clear command and then backs that command up with why Christians make the best citizens of any country's kingdom or government. How do we live joyfully in America?

We Embrace this World with Our Eyes on the Next

Do you see that straightforward command in verse 1? *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.* Every person, psyche, soul, the whole person. Be subject to or submissive. It means to recognize authority and that you recognize the laws and live by them. You respect or honor the governing authorities, the government that is in place at the present time, whatever point in history you find yourself, ancient Rome or modern America. *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.* We embrace this world with our eyes on the next and we can do so with joy. In the rest of the passage, Paul tells us why – the first and foremost important thing to remember is...

All earthly authority is under divine sovereignty

Go with me to verse 1 and let's read it all the way through. See the command and then the reason why. Romans 13:1 says, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God,* In fact, Paul emphasizes this and repeats his point three times. Verse 1b, *For there is no authority except from God.* Verse 1c, *and those that exist have been instituted by God.* And in verse 2a, *Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.*

The state is a divine institution with divine authority, and in verse 2 Paul warns against rebelling against the law because, *Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.* Now keep pressing on this. Paul is asserting a universal truth about the ultimate origin of those in government, from the President on down. So from a human perspective, rulers come to power through heredity if it's a monarchy, force if it's a dictatorship, or popular choice if it's a democracy. But the Christian mind, the transformed mind, recognizes that, behind the process, whatever the process is, behind the process is the hand of God.

Remember what God revealed to Daniel about himself concerning Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2:21. *He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.* Not only that, Proverbs 21:1 tells us that, *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.* This is a freeing truth that ought to make your heart rejoice so that you can get back to living for the Lord Jesus and reaching people for Christ. Because our God is in the heavens and He does what He pleases. And whatever government you live under or whatever regime that currently exists is ordained or appointed by God. But one of the mistakes people can make is equating God's *appointment* of a government or a leader with God's *approval* of a government or a leader. God's appointment *does not* equal God's approval. This is where we rest in God's providence and not man's presidency. Allow me to illustrate it from the Bible.

Pharaoh. He was the evil leader of Egypt who kept God's people in captivity and issued brutal treatment. After the seventh plague and before God destroyed Pharaoh, the Bible tells us in Exodus 9:16: *But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.* Pharaoh was appointed by God but not approved by God.

Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4:32, when Nebuchadnezzar was thinking about how great he is and how great his kingdom is, God tells him, *and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.*" Nebuchadnezzar was appointed by God but not approved by God. It was done to exalt the name of God. I could mention Cyrus and Persian but I'll give you just one more example.

Pontius Pilate. Go in your mind with me to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. To the betrayal in the garden, denial by Peter, on to the High Priest, and finally Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate after Pilate has flogged him and will eventually crucify him. Jesus remains silent in John 19:10-11, *So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"* ¹¹ *Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."* Pontius Pilate was appointed by God but not approved by God. But God appointed him so that the crucifixion would happen and that Christ would die in the place of sinners. And any sinner who believes in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, will be saved. All of these leaders, good, bad, terrible, whatever, all of them were under the sovereign hand of God for a purpose, so that His name is glorified in your life, in your Christianity, in your witness, in your growth. So we can worry less about the presidency and rejoice more in providence. I can live in this world and embrace this world with my eyes on the next, knowing that all earthly authority is under divine sovereignty.

When you read the rest of the passage, you see that. God has given us government for human flourishing, for society's good, and anarchy is a terrible and anti-God thing. The worst time in Israel's history is described in Judges 17:6, *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* Government is useful so you pay your taxes, so it can restrain wickedness, punish evil, reward good and promote human flourishing. But there is something interesting in the way Paul writes verse 1: *be subject to the governing authorities.* That means submission, but not blind obedience.

The law of the land is never greater than the word of God

There are times— there have always been times— when God's people have to make a choice for civil disobedience in the name of Christ. There are several possible circumstances, and the overarching rule for when we disobey the government would be when the state commands what God forbids OR if the state forbids what God commands. One is gross immorality like in Exodus when the Pharaoh commanded the midwives to kill all Hebrew baby boys. Exodus 1:17, *But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.*

Another is a violation of conscience, such as when in Daniel 3:18 when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego followed their consciences and wouldn't worship the golden idol. They were thrown into the fiery furnace. God is able to deliver us. Verse 18 tells us, *But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.*" They were willing to suffer for the glory of God.

Another reason for civil disobedience is Gospel oppression, where the government forbids what God commands. Then we have an obligation much like the early disciples in Acts 4 where Peter and John are preaching about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and 5000 people are saved. The leaders detained them and they preached the Gospel to the leaders. Peter and John were forbidden to preach about Jesus. Acts 4:19-20 says, *But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge,²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."* Then in Acts 5, when they are arrested again and forbidden to preach, they say, *"We must obey God rather than men."*

Because although we embrace this world, we have our eyes fixed on the next. How do we live in the here and now? We know all earthy authority is under divine sovereignty. We believe in providence not presidency, because the law of the land is never greater than the word of God. We receive that as medicine to our souls as we think more about how to live for Christ than we do anything else. Our view of God needs to get bigger. We trust His sovereignty and providence. There is joy that God is in control. He's good. He is your father and this is your father's world.

(Pastor prays)