

Romans 13:1-7 - Authority

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is taken from Romans 13, verse 1 to verse 7, and is found on the Church Bible on page 1140.

Let everyone be subjected 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 authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

For the rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?

Then do what is right, and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for the rulers do not bear the sword for no reason.

[1 : 13] They are God's servants, agents of wrath, to bring punishment on the wrongdoers.

Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also as a matter of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servant, 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 honour, then honour. Amen. Great. Thank you, Gloria, for reading for us.

Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we do thank you so much for your word to us.

[2 : 13] And as we come to listen to it now, we recognise there is much to distract us. And so we pray, please, that you would be at work by your spirit, that you would soften our hearts and open our ears.

We pray that this wouldn't just be a kind of brain dump from my brain to other people's, but that this would be you speaking through your words, doing us good and transforming us into Christ-likeness, as we pray in his name.

Amen. Well, if you're visiting this morning, you find us in Romans chapter 13, which is the series that we have been working through together.

And we have come to a really interesting section on how we deal with and relate to authority. In the opening chapter of his book on authority, a guy called Jonathan Lehman points out that Western culture is massively anti-authority.

Anti-authority. And his proof is the movies, right? So he says that if you look at the heroes in the movies that we make and that we watch, they are almost always anti-authority, rising up against the oppression of a tyrannical ruler.

[3 : 25] So Luke Skywalker fights against the Empire in the Star Wars trilogy. Never seen it, don't like it, but apparently it's true. Neo against the machines in the Matrix trilogy. Have seen it, quite enjoyed it.

This isn't actually, why am I giving movie reviews on the way through? Jason Bourne against the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the Bourne trilogy. Katniss Everdeen against the Capitol and President Snow in the Hunger Games trilogy.

Tristan Four against the Erudites in the Divergent trilogy. If all that's a bit too highbrow for you, he points out that we actually teach our children to be anti-authority.

And he points that out from Disney movies. Little Mermaid sings, Betcha on land they understand and they don't reprimand their daughters. And she rebels against the authority of her father.

Queen Elsa sings, No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free. As she flees from the expectation and authority of the people. Now perhaps there are good reasons this morning for you or me or any

of us to be anti-authority.

[4 : 26] Perhaps you've had a bad experience of someone who was in authority over you. And we'll think more of that in a moment. But the truth is as you listen to Romans 13 being read and as Gloria read it to us earlier.

What you cannot help but notice is that it is not anti-authority. It's very pro-authority. If you look down at verse 1, it starts with, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. Literally, don't be anti-authority. Be not just pro-authority, but be subordinate to authority. In fact, when you look closely at the passage, really that is essentially the only instruction in the passage. It gets repeated in slightly different ways at different times. But basically it's the same idea. So verse 1 is be subject. Verse 3 is do what is right or literally do what is good.

And verse 7 is give what is owed. But it's the same attitude and the same heart that's coming through in all those instructions. So here's the thing for us this morning. This is the shock.

[5 : 30] Paul thinks authority is good. Given by God. Now, not does he think that it's always used rightly. But the abuse of authority doesn't mean that all authority is necessarily bad.

That. And actually, authority and the right attitude and submission to authority is, says Paul, a central part of Christian discipleship. Now, I want to show you just how this works.

So I think there are four ideas or four steps that Paul takes in this passage. Let me show them to you. Number one is this. All authority belongs to God. All authority belongs to God.

If you take another look at verse 1. 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.

Now, the way our NIVs have translated this verse makes it sound like it's repeating itself. No authority except that which God has established and authorities have been established by God. That doesn't quite capture the point because the first established isn't actually in the Greek.

[6 : 36] The NIV translations have added that. Literally, the sentence is, for there is no authority except from God. Really, the point is that God is the one in the world to whom all authority belongs.

In other words, like it or not, acknowledge it or not, you and I live in a world ruled by a God who has all authority. All authority.

Absolute dominion. Over all that he has made. Including you and me. There is not one person or one place in this world that God is not in authority over.

He is not in charge of. It's basically the same point that Paul was making at the end of chapter 11. When in verse 36, he says about God, for from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever and ever. Amen. Now, I think there are at least two implications of all authority belonging to God. The first one is this. Is that authority is not necessarily a bad thing.

[7 : 40] It's not wrong. Authority is actually a good thing. God only possesses good things. And so for him to be the God of all authority means that he is good and authority is good.

So whatever problems that we have with authority, whatever bad experiences we might have had with those who misuse it, the problem is not authority per se. Because authority, the power and commission to rule over someone or something is not itself a bad thing.

And the other implication then is that actually the problem in the world is not a problem with authorities. The problem is really a problem with rebellion. That's the problem in the world, isn't it? We live in a world where the problem is not that God is in charge of all things. We live in a world where the problem is that people have rebelled against that. Sin is the Bible's word for it.

And that means that sin is not kind of just naughtiness. It's not disobedience to a few moral instructions. Rather, sin is fundamentally rebellion against the authority of God.

[8 : 46] Sin says to God, okay, this might be your world. All authority might belong to you, but I'm going my way and doing my thing. I will not submit to you and I will not do what you say.

And that sinful rebellion shows up in our culture, not only by what we say about God, or even just our prevailing attitudes to the authority structures in our lives. It shows up, I think, in the fact that pretty much we're anti all authority except our own.

I only do what I say I'm going to do. I don't listen to anybody. I don't give an account to anybody. I will do what I want to do. We're like little mermaid who is largely positive about her own ideas and just really negative about her father's.

Perhaps you've never thought about it like this. But I think this kind of comes into sharp focus when you see what God has done to save the world. You know, the heroes that we create, right, they're

all anti-authority, aren't they?

But who is the real hero of history? It's not Luke Skywalker. It's not Moana or Little Mermaid. It's Jesus Christ. And what is Jesus Christ like?

[9 : 57] Well, the eternal son of God puts on human flesh and is born as a baby, come as saviour. And he lives here in full submission to his father's plan.

And not only that, Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus submitted to his parents as well. We're told by the gospel writers that Jesus paid his taxes.

Jesus prays then in submission to his father in the Garden of Gethsemane, not your will, not my will, but yours be done, he says. And then silently submits to the authority, even of the unjust Pilate, as he hands him over to be crucified.

Jesus could have been anti-authority at any of those points, couldn't he? He could have called down fire from heaven to destroy the chief priests or the Roman rulers. But instead, he submitted to them and to his father in heaven.

And he didn't cry freedom. He didn't burst into song about doing things his own way. Why? So that he might save you and me.

[11 : 06] Ironically, he submitted to save rebels like you and I. That in our sin, which is not our personal battle with immorality, but is a relational battle with the God who is in charge, that in that battle I might be won back and brought under the loving rule of my father in heaven, that my sin might be dealt with and forgiven, and I could come to him forgiven and cleansed, living in submission like Jesus to those who he's put over me.

So that's the first point. All authority belongs to God. Second point, God delegates authority to others. This is the next step that Paul makes, which is really the key to all of this. All authority is God's, verse one.

That means that the authority of others has to, by definition, come from God. In other words, God has established it, to use the words of the passage.

So in verse one, we're told that any authority that exists, exists because God has delegated some of his authority to it. Now, in giving authority away like that, it doesn't mean that God is less authoritative.

Rather, it means that the government or the ruler or whoever it is, is in a sense acting on ruling on God's behalf in that area. And this is repeated through the section. So look down, verse one, God has established authorities.

[12 : 25] Verse two, God has instituted them. Verse four says that the one in authority is God's servant, which is then repeated a couple of other times. Here's the principle.

The God of all authority has so set up the world in which we live that we experience his authority through the authority of others. Others that he has put in place.

Now, there are loads of authorities like that. That's the authority that parents have over their children, that bosses have over their employees, that teachers have over students. Even controversially, husbands have over wives.

And not all of those authorities are exercised in the same way, right? Sometimes authority is simply an authority of influence. And other times it's an authority of command.

So a husband is to influence his wife, not to command her. But if you get stopped by the police for doing 90 miles an hour on the A406, they are not just going to try and influence you, they are going to command you to slow down.

[13 : 29] Now, in Romans 13, the focus is the government. And they have a sort of authority, you find in verse 4.

That is, they have the authority not of influence, but the authority of command. It is right, says Paul, for the governing authorities to command their citizens to behave in certain ways.

We'll think more about the limits on that in a moment. But notice that they bear God's authority to command, and they are to give their full time to governing like that in verse 6.

So here's the principle. God's authority is delegated in part to those he places in charge. Not so that they have absolute authority, only he has that, but so that in a limited way they can rule on his behalf for the good of others.

Now, if that's right, God gives his authority to others that they might rule on his behalf, you have to deal with a very obvious issue. Just think when Paul is writing this passage, right?

[14:34] It's about AD 57, something like that, he's writing in Rome. And at the time, a young man called Nero has just been made the Roman emperor. And Nero was not selected in a vote of the people.

So Nero's mother poisoned her husband and then married her uncle, the emperor Claudius, and then persuaded Claudius to appoint Nero as his successor over and above his own biological son, Britannicus.

And then when she persuaded him to do that, she poisoned Claudius and Britannicus. So Nero came to power through the manipulative work of a serial killer.

Nero, not a democracy. And yet Paul says, Romans 13, God put him there. God has established it. God has instituted it.

Nero is God's servant. Now, what does that mean? Well, of course, it doesn't mean that God endorses how he got there or how he behaved when he was there. God is really clear on that.

[15:38] Nero is going to be guilty of some terrible things, not least dipping Christians in tar and setting them on fire to light up his garden parties. And God does not approve of that.

Rather, the point is that any authority that Nero has, he has on loan from God. It's not an innate right of his own. The fact that he abused his authority and misused it is another issue.

But the authority he had was from God. And God sovereignly raises him up for a time and temporarily and partially invests him with an authority. And Nero will have to give an account to God for how he used it.

Because he always remained under God's ultimate authority. We were talking about this in the sermon read through on Friday and trying to think that actually illustrating this might be helpful. So here's an illustration. And if it doesn't work, you can blame the others in my sermon read through group. Imagine if I lent you my car. This is a fictitious thing because I'm not going to do it.

[16:39] But imagine if I did, right? I said, listen, I've got something in my car. It needs delivering to Luton. Could you please take my car and deliver this box to Luton?

That's where it needs to go. And I said to you, listen, my car is precious to me. I value it. Don't scratch it. Don't bend it. Drive straight to Luton.

Drop off this package and then come back, please. And you get in my car and you say, yeah, sure, I can do that. And then you drive like a maniac, scratching the car, bending the car.

And you end up in Brighton and you drop off the box on the beach and just kick it into the sea. Now, what would I think about you then? I would be mad, right? I would be cross. And I would be right to be cross.

You know, and I would take my car off you and reprimand you sternly for what you did. But here's the point, right? It was still always my car, right?

[17:37] And you drove it to Brighton. You didn't drive your own car. You took mine. And just because you abused it didn't mean you owned it. And just because you drove it badly and knocked people over along the way doesn't mean that cars are bad.

It means you're a bad driver. Now, that's the point with authority here. Authority, all authority belongs to God. He loans it to people to whom he will hold account for a time, for a purpose. And he says, this is what it's for. It's for the good of those that you will rule over. You will have to give an account to me for how you've used it. And the fact that they then abuse it is not actually his fault.

It's theirs. Now, if you think about it like that, it brings real hope, doesn't it? Maybe you've got a really bad boss at work.

Maybe you're at school and you've got a really grumpy teacher. Or maybe you've met an unreasonable traffic warden this week. Or maybe it's even more serious than that. And I know there have been experiences of great injustice in this room.

[18:44] Maybe you've come across a corrupt police officer or an unjust judge or a racist sister. You know, don't you, that all of those things will be held to account by God. He will call them to account.

And it's right for us to use whatever voice we have to call them out. But the real bite of this passage is not so much them and how they use their authority. It's about you and how you use yours, isn't it? Because it means that any authority you have has been delegated to you by God and he will hold you to account for it. Are you a parent? Are you a parent? That means God has given you authority, his authority in the family for the good and the blessing of your family.

And you are not allowed to just take and use that in whatever way you will. Instead, you are to use it in the manner in which he has intended it. And he will hold you to account.

It strikes me that there's two ways that parents go wrong with this, doesn't it? One is they become demanding and they exercise a greater authority than that which God has given them.

[19 : 49] That's one error. The other error is they abdicate all responsibility and they pretend as if they're given no authority in their family at all. It's not just parents, though, is it?

Maybe you're in charge at work. God has given you that authority for the good of those under you. Perhaps you lead a ministry in the church. It's the same. You're given authority for the good of those around you.

Perhaps you exercise an office in the local government. Or maybe you just simply have the authority to keep your room tidy. That authority is given to you by God. And in an important sense, it's still his.

And he will ask you how you used it. All authority belongs to God. God delegates authority to others. Thirdly, God's delegated authority has limits.

Now, we are going to have to work a little bit hard to see this, but I think this is one of the most important things to see. So try and come back with me if you can. Verse 4.

[20 : 47] Let me read it to you. 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.

Now, notice this carefully with me. We've seen this before, right? God establishes authorities as his servants, yeah? And his design is for our good and not for our harm.

We've seen, too, that the servants in question in Romans 13 are the governing authorities. That is, the government. And they hold a sword, we're told, on God's behalf.

They are agents of wrath to hold wrongdoing to account. But the key question that we need to ask, then, is, well, what is that good? What is the good that God intends these authorities to bring about in the world?

Well, it seems, doesn't it, that the focus of the authorities of government is for our good, verse 4. It's a repetition of verse 3, where we're to do what is right or good, so that we don't get in trouble with them.

[21 : 49] And good here seems to be exactly the same as what we were looking at last week in Romans 12, verse 9, where we are told to love what is good and hate what is evil. In other words, this is moral good.

Put this together with me for a moment. God has delegated authority to governments for moral good, or to use another word, justice, right?

The judgment between right and wrong. And for that, the government bears the sword to punish wrongdoing and to protect the good. Now, notice then what it's not, right?

The government are not to judge between belief and unbelief. That's really significant. The government are not to enforce faith. They have not been given authority to decide what is true faith and false faith.

There is no sword in Romans 13 for unbelief, but for injustice, wrongdoing. That's what the sword exists for. Interestingly, in the New Testament, the authority to discern between belief and unbelief is not given to the government.

[22 : 57] It's given to the church. And they're not given a sword to enforce that, but what Jesus calls keys to open and close fellowship around the Lord's table, it seems to me.

So the church has one kind of authority focused on faith. The state has another authority. There are limits. And that works in lots of different areas, doesn't it?

The authority of a parent is not the authority over all children everywhere, but is over their own children. And it's not over their adult children in the same way as it is over their infant children.

The boss is not the boss everywhere, but over their team at work. And Paul's point about the government here is really just an outworking of what's been said in the Bible before.

So God says to Noah in Genesis 9, you might remember that after the flood, they come out of the ark. And we're told that still the inclination of the human heart was evil all the time. And God says this, whoever sheds human blood by humans shall their blood be shed.

[23 : 59] For in the image of God has God made mankind. And Paul says, by that, that authority to hold blood to account, that is given to the government.

And on the one hand, that limits the power of the government. They're not given authority over all things in our lives, over what we believe or what we wear or what we say. Or even over what life is or why life is precious.

God has told them that. It's not their decision. It's because people are made in his image. But in those limits, the government are given the authority to protect and preserve life.

And they are given that role to punish blood for blood and promote good. Now, perhaps you can see then, can't you, that authority goes wrong, not only when it's abused, when it's used to support evil and not good, but also when it's extended beyond the limits or the boundaries which God has set.

So the North Korean government, who force atheism on their citizens, are outstepping the boundary of the authority that God has given them.

[25 : 10] God has not given them authority to do that. The medieval church that punished unbelief with the sword was also operating beyond its limits. And in our own country, I think you see it really clearly too, can't you?

The government's failure to protect the life of the unborn child, or seemingly its desire to legalise assisted suicide for the sick and the elderly, is an abdication of responsibility.

When I wrote to my MP, or our MP, if you live in the same neighbourhood as I do, when I wrote to our MP about the assisted suicide bill, I wrote and I said, this is not your right to choose this.

You don't have the authority to decide what life is or isn't. You are way beyond the realms of governing authorities. She disagreed. And so we see, don't we, that the government is given the responsibility to promote and protect life.

And so it also means that it's to fight poverty and oppression that prevents people from making a living and feeding their families. It's to provide a stable economy that rewards hard work.

[26 : 15] It's to uphold marriage as the union of a man with a woman for the continuation of life. Ultimately, this is why we pray for those in government, as Paul tells us to in 1 Timothy.

Not praying, oh, will the government make disciples of all nations? That's not their job, is it? That's our job. That's the church's job. But praying that they would rule in such a way that we are able to preach the gospel and make disciples of the nations.

And so if you don't pray for the government yet, do start. This is the responsibility God has given you. And if you don't write to your MP when they are on the cusp of doing something that is threatening life, then start doing that.

That's your responsibility. Authority belongs to God. He set limits for it. Which leads us to the final step. And perhaps the most difficult, not complicated, it's dead simple, but the most difficult to follow through on is this.

My Christian life, your Christian life is lived in submission to authority. Hopefully this final step makes some logical sense, but perhaps you can see it explicitly in the passage as well.

[27 : 20] These are the instructions, aren't they, that we started with. Be subject. Do what is right or good. And give what is owed in verse 7. Pay taxes, give revenue, give respect, and give honor.

Verse 5, though, spells it out really clearly. Therefore, it says, it is necessary to submit to the authorities not only because of possible punishment, but also as a matter of conscience.

Here it is there, right? We not only submit to the authorities God has placed over us because we are fearful of the punishment of their sword, right? We don't want to be cut with that. We might want to be free from fear, as verse 3 puts it, so we do what is right.

But we also do it as a matter of conscience. Because our conscience are beholden to God, and he tells us to submit to them and to obey them.

So much so, and I say this not flippantly, right? But if you drive a car, keeping to the speed limit is part of what it means to be a Christian. It's discipleship.

[28 : 22] Right? Paying your taxes is discipleship. Turning up to work on time, listening to the teacher, listening to your parents.

That is Christian discipleship. Respecting those that God has put in charge of you is how we love God and please him. Think about that some more.

What does that mean? Especially what does it mean if I'm used to not trusting authority? Right? I think if you're raised, like all of us are, I think really, in a kind of anti-authority world where we're told that the highest good is to reject all authority, what does this look like and what does it mean?

Well, we're to submit, aren't we, to the authority of others, the authority of the state, the authority of teachers or parents or rulers or bosses, whatever it is, when it is used within the boundaries that God has set for it.

If the state starts demanding that we stop being Christians, we should rebel against that authority because it's not right use of it. If authorities demand that we do something immoral, we should resist that.

[29 : 30] If the state sanctions racism or the killing of innocent people, we're not to submit to that. Because the state is using its authority in the opposite purpose for which it's intended.

But still, it's really important we do not reject all authority as bad because authority is from God. It's still his car, even when it's been driven badly.

And so I submit to it out of reverence for God. So a Christian disciple is known as someone who respects authority. Not someone who sticks it to the man, just quote, quote, school of rock, right? But someone who is rightly submissive, seeing that their attitude to authority is really their attitude to God. I wonder if this is perhaps really helpful for you at work.

Maybe you've got a bad boss or you run in a poorly run workplace. Maybe you're in a place where everybody moans about the management. Maybe you are the management, people moaning about you.

[30 : 35] And you just feel like giving up. Well, remember how you act there is massively driven by who you think is ultimately in charge. Perhaps you're at school and it's cool at school to not listen to the teachers.

It's cool at school to be the person who doesn't ever listen to their parents. Well, listen, if you're a Christian, you must recognize that submission to the teacher's authority is really about what your attitude is to God, not your attitude to them.

Being told what to do is not wrong. It's given for your good. And we flourish best when we submit to authority that's well used.

Let me finish with a story. About 20 years ago, a friend of mine set up a business in a country in Eastern Europe. He and I, we've both been involved in student ministry in universities.

And we've done some stuff overseas in Eastern Europe with university students. And he'd been to this particular country a number of times. And he noticed just how hard it was for young graduates to get jobs.

[31 : 41] I mean, some things don't change, do they? But right, it was really difficult for them. And lots of them were trying to leave the country all the time to go and find jobs elsewhere. And that was really ruining the church because you would spend ages discipling these students who'd come to faith in Christ.

And as soon as they'd become Christians and got their degrees, they would just leave the country and then the church would be no better off. So my friend, who was a pretty sharp guy, much sharper than me, decided that the best way to do it would be to set up a company in that country for the young graduates to work in.

So he set about establishing an IT company that became very successful. And as they set up this company, they did something extraordinary in this East European country.

And that was this. They paid their taxes. They paid their taxes, all of them. They paid them on time and in full. And in fact, it was so extraordinary at the time for a firm to set up a business like that and to pay its taxes that it caught the attention of the president of the country.

He was like, wait, most Western businessmen and women come to this country to set up business to avoid paying taxes. And it strikes me that you are doing the opposite of that and you are paying your taxes.

[32 : 56] So the president called him up and brought him to a meeting to explain why his company is paying his taxes. Explain to me what is different about your company that means you're paying your taxes.

My friend said, oh, I'm so glad you asked. It's because I'm a Christian and I believe that paying my taxes is the way I honor the Lord and not just you.

What a great opportunity for the gospel. And maybe you'll get one like that at work. Maybe you'll get one like that at school. Maybe you'll get one like that in your wider family as we submit to the authorities that God has placed over us, acknowledging that he will hold them to account.

Let me pray. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we do admit and confess to you that we are often anti-authority.

And not really so much always because we're concerned about justice and we see authority used badly. Sometimes it's that. But often, Lord, it's just that we want to be in charge ourselves.

[34 : 06] And we resent the authorities that you have given and put over us. Please forgive us for that, Lord. Please help us as a church to be people in the world who rightly submit to the authorities that you've put over us.

That we would be a blessing to this corner of northwest London. And, Lord, that others might see that our submission and willingness to live quiet lives trusting you is because of what we believe about Jesus.

The submissive Savior who died to forgive us for our rebellion against you. And so we trust in his name and we ask that by your spirit you give us power to live for his glory.

As we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.