

Subjection to the State (13:1–7)

In Romans 12:2 Paul had said, “Do not be conformed to this world [this age],” but he didn’t intend for Christians to isolate themselves from society to avoid conformity. Government would inevitably be a part of every believer’s life and so Paul needed to address the Christian’s relationship to it.

Thus 13:1 begins. . .

13:1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

The command to submit to governing authorities was particularly necessary when Paul wrote to the church in Rome since there was a large number of corrupt leaders, and many of the first converts were Jews who believed that they should live under a theocracy (Deut. 17:15), not a foreign power. As a result, there were constant uprisings and a willingness to band together and fight at the slightest provocation. However, Paul calls the believer to remember that God is sovereign over everything including kings, nations, and all other earthly powers. Many places in the Bible tell us this.

- Psalm 22:28: “. . . He rules over the nations.”
- Proverbs 21:1: “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.”
- II Kings 19:25: “Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass”
- Isaiah 46:9–10: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention,”
- Luke 1:52: “[God] puts down the mighty from their thrones, and exalts the lowly” (cf. Job 5:11).
- Daniel 2:21: “[God] removes kings and sets up kings.”

Paul’s logic is if God is sovereign, every authority must be the result of His will—even Gentile powers; and if they all exist by the will of God, then believers should submit to them.

In Romans 13:1, the terms in Greek used for “governing authorities” are not limited to those in positions of civil authority, but refer to anyone who surpasses us in dignity or position. The KJV is closer to the original Greek: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” In other words, the subject at hand is governing authority, but the authority given to husbands, parents, and church leaders comes from God as well. Our submission is a proper response to their status.

All leaders are to be respected, for all are in their position by divine appointment. Even if a position is abused, an authority is usurped, or an individual is unjust, their position has been established by God. Jeroboam was one of the most wicked kings of Israel, but 1 Kings 12:15 describes arrogant leadership as “a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord.” Pilate played a huge role in Jesus’ crucifixion, yet Jesus said to him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John

19:11). Acts 2:23 says that Jesus was “delivered over [to be crucified] by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.” God had predetermined that Jesus would be crucified and Pilate’s decision to hand Jesus over was the means by which God accomplished His will. However, in order for Pilate to act he needed to be in a position of authority—a position that God had given him.

It should also be observed that there is no secular form of government that is specifically Christian—whether socialist, monarchial, dictatorial, or democratic—for all kingdoms exist by the will of God. Daniel 4:17 says, “the Most High rules the kingdom of men.” Thus, no form of rule exempts Christians from their obligation to submit.

All of this means that God's will in the present age is to govern the world of mankind through human civil authorities. This is God's plan. Man did not create government. God did. Man does not sustain it. God does.

In sum, the first reason Paul gives to submit to authority is that all authority is instituted by the God who governs all things. This understanding of the world becomes the basis for our response to those who are in positions of power over us.

13:2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Verse 2 is the obvious inference from verse 1. If God wills that civil governments exist and that some people have authority over others, then to dishonor authorities is to resist God. And resistance to God results in condemnation.

When we submit to government, we submit for God's sake. 1 Peter 2:13 says, “Be subject *for the Lord's sake* to every human institution.”

13:3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;
13:4(a) for it is a minister of God to you for good.

Verse 3 probably follows the original thought of verse 1, not verse 2: Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities not only because they are appointed by God (13:1), but also because rulers serve God’s purposes by suppressing evil and rewarding good (13:3). Or, in words closer to the text, rulers bring fear upon evil doers and give praise for good behavior. Thus, since God is a moral God, the ruler is *God's* servant (minister - διάκονός - *diakonos*) since he encourages moral law by punishing evil and praising good. This is also for good for us; it enhances our quality of life (13:4). This is the second reason to submit to civil authority.

Nebuchadnezzar is an example of a ruler who served God. Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who destroyed Jerusalem, but in Jeremiah 27:6 God says, “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, My servant.” God calls Nebuchadnezzar His servant for he carried out God’s purposes in judging the evil of God’s people (although Nebuchadnezzar was unaware that he was doing so).

In reading Romans 13:3–4 we need to avoid two errors:

1) The first error we should avoid is assuming that Paul lived in a time when government functioned benevolently toward its citizens. It didn't. Rome was hostile toward anyone who disagreed with it. The majority of those who lived in the Roman Empire were slaves and Caesar would soon become the great persecutor of Christians. We must not think that Paul had naïve notions about human goodness or that government could do no wrong. He spoke from a historical context where that was obviously not true. Nevertheless, he still spoke of government as superior to anarchy.

2) The second error would be to think that these verses mean that whatever the government says, Christians are obligated to do. If this were true it would surely lead to disobedience to God.

It seems more likely that Paul is speaking of the true design of government; he is not addressing the abuse of power by wicked men. Government is to serve the people; it is to result in the flourishing of humanity and society. But the command to submit to people does not make them God. Government is *only* a servant of God, not God Himself and is, therefore, not infallible in its decisions. God gives people authority under Him, and qualifies the extent of that authority. As an institution, government is designed by God for the benefit of men and is to be benevolent, and therefore, should be respected and obeyed (Hodge, 407). Nevertheless, there is also legitimate civil disobedience. For example, when Israel was in Egypt, the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birth stool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives *feared God*, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. . . . *So God dealt well with the midwives . . .* (Exo. 1:15–20). God blessed the midwives for their *disobedience* to the king. Peter gave the principle behind civil disobedience: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). If the law commands what God forbids, or if the law forbids what God commands then we must disobey the law.

13:4(b) . . . But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Verse 4 also gives the third reason for submission to government, namely, because civil authorities punish evil and if we disobey them we will be punished—even with capital punishment in some cases (implied by the expression, "bear the sword;" cf. Ro. 8:35–36).

As a servant of the will of God, government executes judgment on evil. God is glorified when moral law is upheld. A father glorifies God when he punishes evil behavior in his children. A church glorifies God when it disciplines its unrepentant members. In the same way, even if it does so unconsciously, government glorifies God when it administers justice. The punishment of evil demonstrates that there is a moral law and that punishment is a just response to disobedience.

13:5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

We should submit to authority to avoid punishment (13:4), but that is not all that is expected of us; we should also obey authority for conscience' sake (13:5). Submission to authority is not only a civil duty that is enforced with punishment; it is also a moral duty. A Christian is obligated to do what is good and since disobedience to authority reveals a rebellious heart, it should bother our conscience when we disobey.

13:6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.

It is best to see verse 6 as an inference from what has been said about the nature and design of government in general, not as something else connected to verse 5. Because government has been appointed by God for the good of man, and because individuals have been placed in their positions by God, believers should pay taxes to support them. Those in authority have devoted themselves to governing full time and have no other way of supporting themselves. Since they function as ministers of God, we should give what is necessary for them to discharge their duties. Their positions and means of support have both been determined by God.

Out of all the examples that Paul could have used to express our response to authority, he mentions paying taxes. Resistance to paying taxes was not new then, and it isn't new today.

13:7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Since God has given people their authority, we should render to them what belongs to them (cf. Matt. 22:21; Mk. 12:13–17). In Mark 12:14 Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17).

Paul believed that honoring those in authority had a definite bearing on the spread of the gospel (I Tim. 2:1 ff), and his teaching in verses 1–7 is consistent with his interaction with authorities found in the Book of Acts. In our society we are experiencing something different altogether. The lack of honor in American culture is reaching epidemic proportions. And yet respect for authority is a cardinal Christian virtue. We are to honor those whom God has placed in a position of honor no matter who they are. A bad father is still a father. A bad judge is still a judge. A bad king is still a king.

The implications of this paragraph extend to almost every aspect in our daily life—from obeying speed limits, to following building codes, to keeping your grass cut when our neighborhood association demands it, to putting egress windows in the bedrooms (even though they cost more), to not installing loud mufflers or parking in the handicapped stall if you are not the one with special needs.

In sum, we are to submit to civil authority (1) because it's instituted by God (13:1), (2) because it promotes good (13:4a), (3) because we will be punished if we don't (13:4b), (4) because our conscience will bother us if we disobey (13:5), and (5) because we are to show respect to those over us (13:7).