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Romans 13:1-7 – *Subject to Governing Authorities*

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Romans 13:1-7

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. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

“Let *everyone* be subject to the governing authorities.”

Every soul...every life...every person...

Christian or non-Christian...

Subject to the authorities placed in charge.

Paul doesn’t leave much wiggle room in this command...

And yes, it *is* a command.

It’s not a suggestion—

But a command—

And there are no caveats:

He doesn’t say, “Unless they’re not your political party”;

Or, “Unless you don’t like how they’re leading”;

Paul says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”

Before we let this command get under our skin and irritate us too much...

Let’s think about Paul’s context.

Paul is writing this letter to the people in Rome in the first century.

Who is leading Rome at this point in time?—

And it’s not the Christian Democratic Party of Rome—

It’s the Roman Emperor...

Those guys who claimed to be divine figures.

And, at the time of this writing...

The emperor of Rome is Nero.

The infamous Nero who would in a few years lead widespread persecution of Christians in Rome:

Dressing them in fur to be killed by dogs for amusement;

Lighting them on fire in order to illumine the night;

And, oh yeah, crucifying them. (Justo Gonzalez)

This hasn’t happened yet at the time of Paul’s writing to the Christians in Rome...

But Christians are not in a place where they’re receiving preferential treatment from the government.

In fact, just a few years earlier—

The previous emperor, Claudius—

Kicked out all of Jews from Rome.

Unable to distinguish Jews from Christians...

The Jewish Christians got expelled from Rome.

And before that the Romans crucified the leader of the Christians...

Our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, it’s not as if Paul is saying:

“Hey, the Roman government is good.”

“Be subject to them...it’s looking like things are going in our favor if we listen to them.”

No, the Roman Emperor is still making claims to be lord and son of god...

And they surely don't favor the Christians...

But Paul still says, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities."

I wonder how this is sitting with you?

This command to "fall in line."

That's what the word "subject" here means.

It's a military word...

Meaning "know your rank and acknowledge that this person/entity is over you."

"They have authority to rule you."

Not only are we to live our lives subject to Jesus Christ our Lord...

We're to live lives subject to the governing authorities.

Is that rubbing you the wrong way?

Is your pride screaming out:

"Nobody can't tell me what to do!"

"I'm not subjecting myself to any government!"

We've all had a lot of emotional interaction with the government as of late...

And we've seen it all over the news.

The provincial government has been guiding Alberta's response to the pandemic:

Telling us to close and open, close and open schools;

Telling us to close and open and close our in-person worship;

Telling us we can't meet with family outside of our household;

Closing borders to international travel;

Telling us that we can't get together for funerals;

Closing down or limiting some of our businesses.

It's frustrating...

Whether you agree with their decisions or not...

We have a strong emotional reaction to our government right now.
 Maybe you've already had a bad taste in your mouth because of policies:

The proposed new curriculum for K-6;
 The disputes that the Nurses Union has had with the current government;
 Changes in tax laws that affect your businesses or the environment.

There are plenty of policies and decisions to disagree with.

Some of us have been grumbling to each other about the government...

Some of us have been outspoken on social media...

Some churches have refused to obey government restrictions...

And some people are holding rallies for the sake of opposing the government's response.

We aren't always in favor of the government's decisions.

They don't always make choices that we agree with...

Decisions that benefit us...

Or decisions that benefit the church.

But—

Just as Paul commands the Romans to obey the Emperor—

We are commanded to subject ourselves/yield to our governing authorities...

Whether we like them or not.

This is a hard pill to swallow.

If we stop with the first part of the first verse—

“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities”—

Then this command is nearly impossible for us to reconcile with our faith.

But it *doesn't* end there.

Paul goes on to give us reasons for this command:

God places the governing authorities in their position...

And he does it for our good.

Let's talk about those 2 statements:

First, God places the governing authorities in their position.

This really is the doctrine of God's sovereignty...

The belief that there are no limits to God's rule.

That God is in absolute control over every other power out there...

Physical and spiritual.

God does whatever pleases him to accomplish God's purposes.

Most of the time we cannot directly see how God is operating in the government...

But there are instances in the OT when it is explicit.

Over and over again God uses the most powerful people in the world to do his will:

Pharaoh of Egypt is made to set the Hebrews free;

King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian Empire proclaims God's power;

King Cyrus of Persia returns the Israelites from captivity.

These are the world's most-powerful men in their time...

And God humbles them...

He has them do God's will.

He puts them in power and he uses them for his purposes.

Three times in this passage authorities are called "God's servants..."

Those who are doing God's work.

They don't have to be Christians or God-fearers in order for him to use them.

They can be outright blasphemous toward God...

And he is still able...and does!...use them to bring about his will.

Over every ruler in this city...

Over every ruler in this country...

And over every ruler in this world...

Is our sovereign God.

We can be at peace knowing that *God* is in control.

If there is someone we don't like—

Or a party we don't agree with—

We can be confident that God is behind their being in power...

And that he is using them for his purposes.

Now, before we get to Paul's second reason for obeying the authorities...

We must make the note that this is not an unqualified submission.

Paul doesn't get into it here—

His focus is on submission to governing authorities—

But a qualified submission is implied looking at the hierarchy:

The government is over us...

But God is over the government...

Ultimately God is the one to whom we owe our allegiance.

So what happens when the two don't align?

The general rule is:

If the government commands what God forbids...

Or if the government forbids what God commands...

Then civil disobedience is our duty.

We see plenty of examples of civil disobedience in Scripture:

“Fearing God,” the Hebrew midwives let the baby boys live...

Against the king's command to kill them when they're born; (Exod 1:17)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to worship Nebuchadnezzar's statue; (Dan 3)

Daniel refuses to listen to Darius about praying; (Dan 6)

Esther goes to the king without being summoned; (Esther 5)

And Peter and the other apostles refuse to stop teaching about Jesus...

Saying, “We are to obey God rather than people.” (Acts 5:29)

There are times when our obedience to God is not in line the will of the governing authorities.

Some situations require intense discernment...

To know if we are to refuse submission to the government.

But I would say in our current climate in our Western world...

Our duty is to submit to the governing authorities.

We are subjects ultimately to our Lord Jesus Christ...

But our sovereign God has put government in power over us...

And our job is to live under their authority.

Because, the 2nd reason, it's for our good.

Government is necessary!

What would life be like without government?

Well, what would sports be like without referees?

What if the NHL said, "Let's try an experiment..."

"Let's have the officials sit out."

"Let's have the Oilers and Jets call their own game."

It would be chaos!

Penalties would be called that weren't penalties.

Obvious penalties would be argued by those committing the offenses.

No one would have authority to enforce the rules of the game.

This is just a game we're talking about!

What if we didn't have a government?

We went for a run yesterday with the girls in the stroller.

We didn't have to run in the street and dodge cars because there are sidewalks...

Provided to us by the government.

We didn't have to worry about people driving on the sidewalk because there are laws against that...

Provided to us by the government.

I didn't question my safety leaving the house and coming into the church this morning...

Because laws are enforced by the government.

God puts governing authorities over us for our good.

We submit to them for our good.

God is a God of order...not chaos.

We are anxiously waiting for God to bring his full rule on earth...

Where every knee will bow down to Christ.

And we know that God can do it whenever he wants...

He can overthrow the broken leadership of governments with no effort at all.

But his command for us isn't to overthrow the government—

Or disobey the government—

His command is to submit to the governing authorities—

Even as we wait—

So that those he puts in power may bring order and justice...

So that all people may flourish.

Proclaiming and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ—

Hailing Jesus as King over Caesar or any other government—

Is always our charge.

But God's coming kingdom isn't characterized chaos and violence...

It's characterized by righteousness, sacrifice, and peace.

We subject ourselves to the rule of the governing authorities...

Because God places them there for our good...

So that there might be order in God's good creation.

So now, what might this look like?

1. Pay your taxes.

Don't cheat the government out of what is theirs.

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,” as Jesus says. (Matt 22:21)

Trust that God will take care of you financially as you pay your taxes honestly...

Not cheating or short-changing what is the government's due.

2. Pay them your respect.

We do this by following the laws of the land...

Like them or not.

We also do this by applying the 9th commandment:

“Do not bear false witness.”

Don't gossip about, slander, exaggerate their words, or bear false witness against them.

Memes that mock our leaders on social media are not a way to show honor and respect.

Respect them—

All of them—

As the ones God places over us.

3. Pray for them. (1 Tim 2:2)

Pray for their health;

Pray for their families;

Pray for them to have wisdom;

Pray for them to know God's peace;

Pray prayers of thanksgiving to God for them;

That he would continue to use them for his purposes.

4. Push them.

The government is called to commend good and punish evil.

When they're struggling to do this, we can call them on it:

We can call on the government to do public justice...

To protect the rights of the vulnerable...

And not favor the haves over the have-nots;

We can write or phone our leaders;

We can sign or even start petitions;

We can protest peacefully;

We can get involved in government in some capacity;

We can educate ourselves on the working of government...

Seek to understand both sides of a debate;

So when something is amiss...

We can speak up.

As Christians, our lives are defined by submission.

We submit to our Lord...

And we submit to his will for our lives.

Which means that we submit to those he places in authority over us.

Our God is sovereign...

He is in control over everything—

Not a hair can fall from our head without his will—

And he loves us and desires good for our lives.

May we give to him our full obedience...

And place our lives in his hands in the ways that he has called us to.

Amen.