

# Subjection to God and Subjection to the State, Part One

by John Piper

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*In Romans 13:1-7, Paul teaches that every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities because there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are established by God.*

**Duration:** 50:53

**Scripture:** Romans 12:9-13

**Topics:** "Government Authority", "Christian Citizenship"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher begins by emphasizing the majesty and power of the book of Romans. He contrasts the triviality of American culture, particularly as portrayed on television, with the profound message of Romans. The preacher then focuses on Romans 13, highlighting the importance of government in society. He emphasizes that government is a gift from God, serving as a dam against evil and providing order and protection. The preacher concludes by urging the congregation to appreciate the existence of government and recognize it as a servant for their good.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org) This morning's text is Romans chapter 13, verses 1 through 7. Romans chapter 13, verses 1 through 7. 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.

Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God. They who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 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. For it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid.

For it does not bear this sword for nothing. For it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore, it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

For because of this, you also pay taxes. For rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them.

Tax to whom taxes do, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. Here we are on our way into the eighth year together in the book of Romans as we start chapter 13. And I am continually amazed at the majesty of the message of this book.

We move from one majestic theme to the other. And our minds and our hearts and our lives are lifted out of the triviality of American culture, especially the kind you find on television. To move from American culture, especially as it appears on television, to Romans is like moving from Buck Hill in Burnsville to Mount Everest in Nepal.

The air is very different. The scenery is very different. The spiritual wherewithal, power is very different.

I'm reading a good biography right now. That's what I mainly do on vacation. This biography is by David Daniel and it's about William Tyndale.

William Tyndale was burned at the stake for the high crime of translating the New Testament into English so that people could read it. In 1526, he had been awakened to the gospel and come alive along with so many in the early days of the Reformation by reading the gospel as it's found in the book of Romans. Especially, he had escaped from all of its incrustations underneath the ceremonial, sacramental, legalistic, medieval Roman Catholic mistranslations of the Vulgate.

The biographer contrasts William Tyndale with Erasmus. You may remember Erasmus. He was a Roman Catholic lover of humanistic learning in those days, the recovery of the classics.

He printed the first printed Greek New Testament. He wrote well-known books on religious themes and there was a chasm of difference between Erasmus and Tyndale. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Tyndale, these are men who in those early days had seen the gospel of Christ crucified and risen with a substitutionary atonement to forgive all their sins and to provide a perfect righteousness embraced and enjoyed by faith alone so that there could be a free communion with God through the one mediator, the God-man, Jesus Christ.

And it just exploded in their lives with joy and freedom and as far as we know, Erasmus never saw this. Daniel writes this sentence that I was blown away by. He said, we nowhere have Erasmus on Romans.

It was a very dangerous book. This was the book that interpreted most fully Christ dying and rising on behalf of the ungodly, that they might be justified by faith alone. This was the book that the ordinary people of England may not read in English and we will burn people at the stake to see that they cannot read it.

That's where the Roman Catholic Church was in 1526. This was the book that when it was read with clear eyes, the whole system of Roman Catholicism was exploded. The Reformation was born.

Purgatory was exploded. There is no such thing. The practice of penance was exploded.

Indulgences whereby you buy people out of purgatory was exploded. Baptismal regeneration, ex operae operato was exploded. Papal infallibility alongside with equal authority of Scripture was exploded.

Eucharistic transubstantiation whereby the sacrifices reenacted mass after mass was exploded. Sacerdotalism with the excessive dependence on priests and mediators with man was exploded. The treasury of merit by which one good saint can store up some merit for another bad saint was exploded.

The mediatorial role of Mary was exploded and on and on. And a glorious liberty happened when ordinary people could read Romans in their Bible English language. It was a glorious period in history.

Romans and Galatians were to be avoided at all costs. Oh, forbid that they would be translated. Let us burn people rather than let this book be read.

You can't keep Mount Everest hidden for long. God has been very merciful to you, Americans. This is more precious than anything under God.

More precious than my wife. More precious than my children. More precious than this church is this book, the Bible.

This is the Word of God and can you believe it? This is English and you can read it. People burned, were burned so that you could have this. How are you doing with it? Is it your love? Is it your morning and evening love? Is it your meditation all the day? This is the blood-bought, burn-bought Word of God.

So, as I enter with you now an eighth year on the book of Romans, chapter 13 in particular, I feel very inadequate. I don't feel like a competent mountain climber. I feel like the air gets a little thin about half the way up and therefore I ask you to pray for me as we move this year into chapter 13.

I have read 1 Corinthians 3 addressed to people like me with words like these, Watch how you build, not with wood, hay and stubble, but with gold and silver and precious stones, because if you build in this church with the false teachings of wood and hay and stubble, your ministry will be burned up. Maybe you will be saved so as by fire, but your ministry will be burned up. You better build on the one foundation which is Jesus with gold and silver and precious stones if you want any reward in heaven.

So let's pray. So Father, as we move now into Romans 13 and climb another peak of this Mount Everest of the Bible, I pray for help. I want to be faithful not only to the words and the clauses and the paragraphs and the logic and the intended meaning of these authors, but with the very spirit, the substance, the fabric, the life, the power of this Word.

And so I ask for your help. And I ask it not only for me, but for those who now are charged with the high worship of hearing the Word of God. I ask your help now in Jesus' name.

Amen. It's going to take us two or three messages, as far as I can see, to deal with verses 1-7 of Romans 13. And here again we have such a huge theme.

When you read this, if you read it in the Spirit, you're drawn up out of the banality and triviality and trifling of typical American culture. Here's the theme. God establishes every government in the world that exists or has ever existed and by implication, disestablishes every government that falls or has ever fallen.

God did that. That's big. And flowing from that theme is the theme of our relationship.

Just let's read verse 1. There is no authority except from God. And those that exist have been instituted by God. And flowing from that is, therefore, how shall we relate to these governments? Whether you live in Boston or Baghdad, Northern Ireland or North Korea, how shall we relate to these civil authorities? That's the issue.

It's huge. The implications are breathtaking. There are implications here for war and peace.

Should we have undone the government in Iraq instituted by God? It has implications for dictators and totalitarianism, concentration camps and gulags, revolts and revelations. Should America exist? I read the Declaration of Independence this week. Just to get it clear, it reads like the opposite of Romans 13.

Laws and law enforcement, political activism and civil disobedience, elections and lobbying, voting and paying taxes, speed limits and seat belts, stop signs and baby seats in back seats. This is not a small text. This is massive for everybody in the world without exception.

This is a high peak on Mount Everest. It leaves the reader dizzy with implications, ready to fall off. I feel very, very fragile on this cliff.

Lest I say something wrong. What would you say? This is a hard text. Here's my question for today.

Why does Paul take up this issue? Suddenly, government appears in Rome, secular government. What's going on? Why did he go there? If you were reading along in chapter 12 and just tracking with this wonderful call, would you have expected all authority in the world, secular and otherwise, has been instituted by God? Is that what you expected to come next? Where did this come from? And so in answer to that question, I have three general impulses that I see in the book of Romans leading there. Why Paul goes there.

And then I see two specific situations in Rome that call this forth. So let's deal first with the three general impulses. Number one, chapter 12, verse two.

Do not be conformed to this world. You see that you remember that. Do not be conformed to this age, this world.

That one sentence puts the church of Jesus Christ on a collision course with secular culture. Right? Do not be conformed to this world. We are on a collision course with secularity.

And we said months ago, do you remember? This is a statement of the pilgrim principle in the New Testament. There is another principle called the indigenous principle. And they are in tension with each other.

The pilgrim principle says this world is not your home. Your citizenship is in heaven. Do not be conformed to this world.

Lead a life that radiates with the king of glory and isn't in step with the drummers of the world. Be different. Don't fit in.

That's the pilgrim principle. The indigenous principle from 1 Corinthians 9 says, I have become all things to all people in order that I might save some. Fit in.

We're American stuff. We're American through and through. Every part of this whole atmosphere here is culturally dictated.

So we live in a tension. And so when they read this, don't be conformed to this world. They got to have in their head.

So how do we fit with Caesar? He's got some ideas for what we are to do with our lives, like military service and taxes and certain places we can and can't go and so on. Do we do that, Paul? So there's one

impulse. Here's impulse number two, Romans 8, 34 to 38.

This is one of the most beautiful and precious parts of all the Bible. And one of the words in it, verse 34, is Christ was raised and is at the right hand of God. Christ was raised and is at the right hand of God.

Basic Christianity is that Jesus Christ was incarnate as the God man. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. The beginning was the word.

The word was with God. The word was God. God is here in Jesus.

This is God. And he died in his human nature. He is buried and he rises and says out of his own mouth, all authority in heaven and on earth is mine.

It has been given to me by my father. And he's exalted to the right hand. And there he stands at the right hand of God.

And so this issue of how God puts governments in place is an issue of Christ putting governments in place. The crowd's intimidated Pilate with what words? We have no king but Caesar. Where did they get that? What's going on there? Well, he's a king.

And if you don't get rid of him, you're not faithful to the king, Caesar. And that's why Jesus died. Jesus died because he's a competing secular authority.

And then he rises, triumphant over Pilate and Caesar and says all that authority is mine. And that's where he is today. So the issue for Christians is not a generic issue of God and government that Jews might have or Muslims might have.

The issue for the Christian is Christ and government. The risen redeemer, mediator, the Christ. King of kings, Lord of lords.

The issue for the Christian reading Romans 8 is not just how does God relate to government, but how does the risen Christ at the right hand of God parcel out his authority in the world. And then just to intensify the issue for the reader, you get to verses 35, 36, 37 in chapter 8. And you read these words that Christians, subjects of King Jesus, are being killed all day long by the... And then it lists five things. One of them is the sword, which is the same word in chapter 13, verse 4, that the governor, the Caesar, the pilot, the American military, the police, the courts do not wield the sword in vain.

Right, they kill Christians with it. That's what chapter 8 says very clearly. We're being killed all day long.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril. Sword? No! Caesar uses his God-given sword to kill Christians. Paul, help us with this.

You say submit to this. You say this is of God. This is of God.

God put Caesar and pilot in place and they kill us. We need help, Paul. So he had to take this issue up.

Third impulse. As you read chapter 12, you come away breathless, adieu, with the beauty of a life of mercy. The chapter begins with mercy.

I beseech you, brothers, by the mercies of God, present your bodies a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable, which is your spiritual service of worship. All of Romans 12 is built on the mercy of Romans 1 to 11. Our

lives are rooted in mercy.

There, to overflow with mercy, you get to verse 9. Let love be genuine. Verse 13, contribute to the needs of the saints. Verse 14, bless those who persecute you.

Bless, don't curse them. Verse 17, repay no one evil for evil. Verse 19, never avenge yourselves.

Verse 20, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. Mercy, mercy, mercy is everywhere in chapter 12. The Christian life is a life of not returning evil for evil.

In marriage, in parenting, in business, in government. You got to help us, Paul. Is this all you want to say about how to handle the evil in the world? Just don't resist it.

And someone smacks you in the right cheek, turn to the other. Also, is that the whole story, Paul, of the massive evil in Caesar's empire? And Paul's answer is, no, it is not the whole story. I have something else to say about evil and how it is managed in the world.

And I'll say it in chapter 13. So those are the three impulses that I think drive Paul to this issue. Now, here are the two specific situations in Rome that I see him responding to.

When you read verses 1 to 7 of Romans 13, up to verse 6, everything's general. Like, submit, don't resist, do what's good, avoid what's bad. That's real vague.

But when you get to verse 6, it's not vague anymore. Verse 6, for the same reason, you pay taxes. For the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing.

Have you ever thought of the IRS that way? 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. So out of all the behaviors Paul might have chosen, like military service, that's a big one, should our kids have to go to war for Caesar and his wicked battles? He didn't touch that one. He touched this one, taxes.

Isn't that interesting? I conclude from that, that's an issue in Rome. Probably it's an issue everywhere, because it was an issue from day one, right? The Herodians come to Jesus and say, Teacher, the tax to Caesar, should we pay it or not in order to trip him up and get him to either be a Caesar supporter or a Jewish supporter? And Jesus says, give me a coin whose image is on it, Caesar's. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

This was an issue from the beginning. Should citizens of heaven pay earthly taxes to pagan rulers? So that's situation number one in Rome that Paul felt I got to deal with this. Situation number two is found in Acts 18 to go like this.

Paul found a Jew named Aquila and a native of Pontus recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. What an upheaval that must have been. Claudius the Caesar until about 54 A.D. got bent out of shape over something in the Jewish community and he evicted all the Jews from Rome.

That's a lot of people probably. It's a big city. Jews are scattered all over the empire and he made every one of them leave his city.

Priscilla and Aquila are Christians, the Christian Jews. We don't know for sure when they became Christians. Were they already Christians in Rome or did they get saved when they came to Ephesus? We don't know.

But there are some other testimonies in secular writers that there were upheavals owing to a certain person named Christus. Maybe an upheaval person in Rome. Maybe a misunderstanding of the name Christus and what was really going on in Rome was that so many Jews were becoming Christians in the synagogues.

It was creating one mega stir. Just like Paul. Everywhere he preached, he goes into a synagogue, preaches and he gets run out of town.

There's an upheaval everywhere the gospel penetrates the Jewish community and some get saved. And maybe there were upheavals owing to the spread of the gospel among Jewish people. That's speculation.

What we do know is all the Jews who were evicted, Aquila and Priscilla were among them. This happened. Let me get you the dates now.

This book, almost all scholars agree, Romans was written about 55 A.D. in Corinth. Most scholars agree this eviction by Claudius happened in 50 A.D. So five years before he writes Romans, there had been this upheaval in the Jewish community which no doubt affected the Christians. And Paul knows they can run them all out of town in a moment.

How should we deal with that potential threat? So those are the impulses and the situations that I think are giving rise to Romans 13. Now here's what I want to do in the little bit of time we have left. Tell you where we're going and then leave you with a couple of very positive teachings that I hope will thrill your heart that this paragraph is in the Bible.

I don't want you mainly to go out today thinking this is one paragraph of overstatements that I don't know how to implement. I want you to go out praising God for this paragraph, and I think you will. Where we're going in the next several weeks, I'm not sure how we'll weave it all together with Father's Day and the entrance on the new campus.

I'm sure I'll have to come back to this and do some special things in between. But we've got to address the issue of, number one, really, Paul? All authority is from God, even Hitler, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Idi Amin? Second, you say submit to civil authority? You don't even qualify it? You mean always? Third, you say the secular authority is not a terror to good conduct but to bad? They're killing Christians! That's what we've got to talk about. We've got to figure this out.

Paul's not stupid. He hasn't forgotten what he's written in chapter 8. So what is he saying? How are we to be guided with this paragraph? That's where we're going. So here's my last issue.

Is all authority from God? Verse 1, let's just read verse 1 again. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Is that true, without exception? Yes, it is.

And the reason I say it is without exception, even the wicked rulers are instituted by God, is because as I read the Bible, I find illustration after illustration of God's sovereign installing of wicked rulers. God oversees the world such that everyone who becomes a ruler becomes a ruler by virtue of His design, many of them wicked, doing wicked things contrary to His revealed will, and God Himself is not a sinner or

unholy or not good in putting those rulers in place. Let me just give you two or three illustrations.

You've been reading your Bible like I have in 1 Kings. 1 Kings, Solomon comes to the end of his reign. Who's going to take over in Israel? Rehoboam's going to take over.

Ha! Rehoboam consults with the old men and asks them wisdom about how to lead. And they say, be merciful, your father was a hard man. Treat the people with more gentleness and they'll follow you and we'll have a great nation.

And then he consults with the young man and the young man said, make your little finger like the thigh of your father's pain and they will submit to you. And he follows these young jerks instead of the old men and their wisdom. And what happens? Ten tribes leave him.

And who becomes king? Jeroboam. And he puts up a false altar in the northern kingdom and he says, this is the God that brought you out of Egypt. Now here's the shocking verse.

1 Kings 12, 15. After all the intrigue of Jeroboam's rise to power in the northern kingdom of Israel, 1 Kings 12, 15 says, it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord. Yes, Jeroboam is in place by virtue of God's authority and design.

Wicked, one of the most, maybe Manasseh outstrips him in wickedness, but he's number two in wickedness. Or Nebuchadnezzar. Now you remember Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was the secular king who sacked and raped and burned Jerusalem, the apple of God's eye. Jeremiah 27, 6 describes him like this, God speaking, now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant. That's the very word used in Romans 13, 4 for secular civil authorities, the servant of God.

Nebuchadnezzar is there as God's designed servant, wicked and ruthless though he be. Here's one last illustration, give you a little quiz. What world ruler in the last 6,000 years has embodied in one act most clearly the opposite of the truth that secular rulers reward good behavior with praise? Answer.

Pilot. No world ruler has ever more clearly responded wrongly to good behavior, namely perfect behavior. Jesus Christ.

If anybody deserved perfect praise, perfect support, perfect esteem, perfect acclamation, it was Jesus. And he got the worst treatment in the history of the world. And when Pilot said to him, don't you know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you? Jesus answered him, you would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from... Yes, the most wicked secular act of government was ordained of God.

That's how he got saved. If you don't have a category for this in your mind, you don't have a category for the gospel. You got saved because God gave authority to one who would crucify Jesus for you.

You try to run away from the sovereignty of God over secular rulers, you run away from the gospel. This is a big issue. And so my answer to the question, is verse 1 true without exception? I say it is true without exception because the one exceptions that you can think of in the Bible are clearly said not to be exceptions.

God removes kings and sets up kings, Daniel 2, 21. There is no authority except from God. This means, this is a huge implication now, I'm going to send you out with it in just a few minutes.

This means that God's will on planet earth today is that the world be governed through civil authorities. God's will is that His overarching power and authority be exercised through good and evil civil authorities. Yes, we are not to conform to this age.

Yes, they will kill Christians with this authority. Yes, you will have to pay taxes with your money to purposes you don't approve. Yes, your lifestyle should be mercy and not vengeful.

And yes, they can exile you from Rome and anywhere else in the world. And yes, I say to you, civil authority is God's chosen instrument to govern the world. And therefore submit out of reverence for God, not out of reverence for the Caesar.

Do you see what Paul is saying with regard to the reverence that Caesar was demanding? Kyrios Kairos, Kaisaros, Caesar is Lord, was in direct competition to Kyrios Iesus, Jesus is Lord. And by saying Jesus, God, has put Kaisar in place, you may not render ultimate authority to this Caesar, but only to God above him. He's a lackey.

This strips him of his pride, his presumption, and frees us to submit to him out of worship for his ruler, Jesus. That's exactly the way 1 Peter said it. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution.

You're not rendering homage to Caesar, you're rendering homage to his Lord, King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is over the government. Keeping the speed limit is Christian worship.

How are you doing, all you snoot heads who say like 17 year olds? Well, it's kind of a rule of thumb. It's a rule of thumb. Your pride behind your steering wheel stinks in heaven.

I will get there on time. I don't care what the servant of my God says. Not a big issue.

It's a small illustration of the arrogance of the human soul. That's a big issue. You know, I wish we didn't feel that law was so burdensome, when in fact it's one of the sweetest gifts God gives to the world.

I'm closing with this. This is what I want to send you out singing with, and I think you will. If you have eyes to see, you will.

That there is a government, bad government, good government, is a sweet gift of God. I see it in verse 4. Look at the first half of verse 4. He is God's servant for your good. He there is the civil authority.

He is God's servant for your good. That's different from saying, and we'll deal with this later, that when you do good, he rewards you. That's not what he's saying here.

He's saying when he exists, he's your servant for your good. That it is good that there is a king, or there is a president, or there is a police force, or there is a militia. It is good.

We take this so for granted. We can't begin to feel what this means. So let me read from Friday's Star Tribune, of a city where this is not true today, and then apply it to us and close.

This is a quote from Friday's newspaper. Laredo, Texas. It's near the border of Mexico.

And right across the border is a city called Nuevo Laredo. Here's what happened. Alejandro Dominguez was the only person brave enough to be police chief.

This just happened this week. Hours after he took office, assailants riddled his body with dozens of bullets in this city, wracked by a turf battle between Mexico's two main drug gangs. The streets were virtually empty Thursday.

This Thursday. A day after the killing, and only a handful of federal police with armed rifles and automatic weapons. Attorney Torino Medrano said, we are defenseless.

It's obvious that the criminals are better organized than the authorities. They sent the National Army and even they were not respected. Who else can we ask for help? Now I want you to do a little exercise in imagination here, to help you love Jesus more in the government.

9-1-1 does not answer the telephone. There are no police anywhere in Minneapolis or St. Paul. The firemen who are, as we know, wonderfully more than firemen, are not there anymore.

There is no National Guard to be called on. There are only brutal, murdering, stealing, raping gangs, free with no consequences in the city. That's life.

And that would be life in every city in the world without Romans 13. We live in America. What an amazing gift.

I would say the same thing if I were preaching this sermon right now in Iraq. What a gift this new government is. And we'll have to wrestle with the problem of how governments change in view of this text.

But I just want you to feel what we call common grace. There's special grace in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen to save our souls. And there's common grace by which God erects a dam against a river of evil in this world, so that it doesn't flood the world with raping violence, to which you would be absolutely helpless.

God's doing that. Don't teach your kids to call policemen anything but respectful names. They're not perfect.

They make mistakes. Firemen aren't perfect. Legislators aren't perfect.

Congressmen aren't perfect. Supreme Courts aren't perfect. We're all bent out of shape about courts these days.

I tell you, with all your desire for change, be on your face in gratitude for the sovereign Christ putting any government in place. Let's pray. Lord God, for a few more years, maybe, we have order and peace.

And then the man of lawlessness will be revealed, 2 Thessalonians 2. That will be your will as well. Therefore, my prayer for me is that I not live a life of vacation, but that while we have light and while we have breath, while we have some semblance of order and peace, even in a land whose justice is not perfect, I would spin myself for the cause of the gospel. Lord, make Bethlehem a church that's free from ultimate allegiance to any government or any party and ready to submit to the government that is, while we use what freedoms we have for purposes way bigger than government.

Oh God, come. Make us light of the glory of Christ. Send us out with our hearts brimming with gratitude that the sovereign King Jesus into whose hand was given all authority has put in place governments and civil authorities in the world.

Thank you. For this season, oh may we not squander our liberty or squander our order or squander our prosperity. Oh God, forbid that we would take life as a vacation.

Let vacations come with paradise in the last day. And now, may we enjoy the Calvary Road with Jesus of self-denial, humility, service, love. In Jesus' name I pray.

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