

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

by John Piper

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*John Piper's sermon explores the biblical principles of submission to authority and the conditions under which civil disobedience is warranted.*

**Duration:** 42:17

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:38-42, Acts 5:29, Romans 13:1-4

**Topics:** "Civil Authority", "Christian Obedience"

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## Description

In this sermon series on Romans 13, the preacher first emphasizes the benefit of civil authority and government, highlighting that they are God's servants for our good. He emphasizes the importance of having order and restraint in society, preventing anarchy and mob rule. The second sermon addresses the question of why Paul speaks in sweeping, unqualified statements about rulers, even though there are exceptions. The preacher draws a parallel to Jesus' radical commands in Matthew 5:38-48, emphasizing the need to comply, be passive, and take it. The sermon concludes by mentioning that the series will continue with a discussion on civil disobedience and the positive engagement of Christians in civil affairs.

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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) Tonight's sermon is found in the book of Romans, chapter 13. And if you would like to follow along with me in your pew Bible, it can be found, the passage can be found on page 948.

Again, it's Romans, chapter 13, verses 1 through 7. 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. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities that God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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. 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. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience.

For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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.

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my cries for mercy. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand, let alone preach? But there is forgiveness with you that you may be feared. I wait for you, O Lord.

My soul waits, and in you do I hope, and in your word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord as I begin to preach, more than watchman for the morning, more than watchman for the morning. O Israel, O Bethlehem, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption, and he will forgive you for all your sins.

In that confidence now we take up this word, Lord, that as forgiven sinners we might find mercy and help to both preach and understand your word. I ask for your help. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I've been persuaded now in talking with some of you that this series, little mini-series on Romans 13, is going to take four sermons and not three sermons. And the reason is because I think it is right that we shouldn't end on a note of considering civil disobedience, which is what we're going to talk about as I promised tonight, but rather we need to talk about how to submit to a government in a context where in one sense the government is us. So in America, with this democratic republic that we live under, it would be good probably for us to reflect on the implications of Romans 13, 1-7 for our positive engagement in civil affairs and not just when we run counter to what we find there.

So that's the new plan. Tonight, reflections on civil disobedience. Next time, Lord willing, reflections on a more positive engagement with an activity which if we were blessed by the Lord might make it unnecessary for us to do civil disobedience.

So let me sum up where we've been and then move into the plan for this service. First, we talked about the benefit of civil authority and government based on verse 4 particularly. He is God's servant for your good.

You see that at the beginning of verse 4? He, the civil magistrate, is God's servant for your good. And I simply stressed that it is good for us that anarchy does not hold sway, vigilante justice does not hold sway, mob violence and mob rule in your neighborhood does not hold sway. That's a good thing and the reason it doesn't is not because humans are good, but because humans are restrained.

That's why it is as peaceful and orderly in this country as it is because there are policemen in the world and there are laws in the world and we should be very thankful. That was sermon number one, putting the positive take on it that Paul wants us to have since God has put these things in place for our good. The second message, which was last time, dealt with the question why Paul speaks in such sweeping, unqualified statements which he himself knows they have exceptions.

Let me read verse 3, just judge for yourself. 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.

Now, the man who wrote that also wrote chapter 8, verse 35 and 36, which goes like this. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? And that word sword is the same word we have right here in verse 4. This magistrate

does not bear the sword in vain. No, he kills Christians with it.

Many times in history. And Paul knows that. He is exhibit A. He spends jail time everywhere he goes.

And when he's being beaten, civil authorities turn their face away. Paul, who wrote verse 3, has already said in verse 8, civil authorities don't just treat good behavior with reward. They kill good behavior sometimes.

So the question last time was, why does he write this way? He knows what Jesus said. You will be brought before kings and governors for my sake, and some of you they will put to death. Luke 21, verse 16.

This is real clear. Paul knows it. Jesus knows it.

We all know it. So last time the question was, why did you write verse 3 the way you wrote it? And I don't want to preach the sermon over again, though I'm tempted to. So here were my two answers, two or three, to that question.

The first was, he wanted Caesar, who I think he knows is reading over his shoulder, or over the shoulder of the Christians in Rome. He wants Caesar to hear loud and clear, states are to act this way. States are to act this way.

Now, we use language like that. We use our language to describe ought realities. I'll give you an example.

Suppose one of my sons, once upon a time, sassed his mother, which is not allowed. And I said, looking him in the eye, in this family, we don't talk like that. Well, he just talked like that.

Everybody knows what that kind of language means. In this family, we don't talk like that. States reward the good and punish the bad.

States do, Caesar. Do you see this, Caesar? That's what we do as states. And the second reason I think he writes like this, is that he wanted Christians in Rome, and us today, to realize that if you're going to emphasize something, don't appeal to the native rebellion in Christian souls.

Appeal to what will subdue them, humble them, make them meek and servant-like. And I said it like this. Nobody ever went to hell because they lived under a regime that was unjust.

But everybody goes to hell because they're arrogant and proud and kick against authority. And therefore, if you're going to write a sweeping statement on one side or the other, you write it in a way that makes Christians know, get your ego under control when you're driving down the road, and don't dictate to the authorities what you think the speed limit should be. I think that's the second reason why he wrote that way.

That was a sermon. You can get it if you want to hear more. Now here we are in sermon number three on this text.

And I promised that we would tackle the issue of civil disobedience. So that's what I want to try to do today. Let's look at texts in the Bible first, that teach that sometimes governments use their authority to require of Christians what they may not give or forbid them to do what they must do.

And then once we see those texts, we will ask the question, okay, if that's a remote possibility for us, under what circumstances and by what means do we engage in such civil disobedience? So first, texts. I referred last time to Acts chapter 5 verse 29, where Peter and the apostles had been arrested for preaching, just preaching, healing a man in particular, and they said when they released them, now don't do that anymore. Don't preach.

To which Peter responded, we must obey God rather than man. So that was last time. Now here are the texts for this time.

Daniel, you don't need to look these up. I'm going to go too fast, but you can jot them down if you want to follow up. Daniel 6, you know the story.

It's the lion's den story. 6, 6 to 10. Reading.

Then these presidents and satraps came by agreement to the king and said, O king, Darius, live forever. All the presidents of the kingdom are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict that whoever makes petition to any god or man for 30 days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. Therefore, King Darius signed the document and the interdict.

When Daniel, now listen carefully. This is really amazing. It's not what you think it is.

It's worse. When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber, open toward Jerusalem, and he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before God as he had done previously. We have a word for that today.

It's called in your face. Went to his house, found an open window facing Jerusalem. Didn't just kind of stand there in a multiple interpretative mode like he might be praying.

Gets down on his knees and he doesn't do it once a day, he does it three times. This is, Darius, I am in your face. That's amazing.

That's amazing. Now keep in mind that no explicit commandment in the Bible says you must pray three times a day, you must be on your knees, and you must do it in front of a window. That's significant.

That's very significant. And we'll be back to it later. That he made a moral choice inferring from things in the Bible this behavior at this time in his face is the way God wants me to behave.

Though there is not one single commandment in the Bible that I have to be in front of a window, be on my knees, or do it three times a day. That's very significant. Daniel chapter 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, another law was passed, the decree was made, you must, this time it's a little different, right? This is a requirement.

With Daniel it was a prohibition, and now with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego it is a requirement. You must bow down in front of this large idol that I have just built for myself. And they would not, and they said, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you, O King, we will not serve your gods, or worship the golden image which you have set up. So there is civil disobedience based on a religious conviction.

No, we won't do what you say, because we worship God Almighty. Here's Exodus chapter 1. We all know this story about these midwives who were rewarded for not killing Jewish babies. Exodus 1.15, Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, When you serve as a midwife to the Hebrew women and see them upon their birthstool, 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, whom God had put in place, but let the male children live. So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew strong.

Now, someone might say in response to those last two illustrations, that they simply portray a legal command that requires us to do something, and of course we wouldn't do something that is sinful to do, no matter who requires us to do it. But what about instances where you're just told not to do something, like Daniel? And there's another illustration like that, namely Esther. Esther is especially illuminating, as you'll see.

You know the situation, she's queen, she's Jewish, her king doesn't even know she's Jewish, Ahasuerus. Haman gets the king to pass a law that on a certain day all the Jews can be killed. Mordecai, her adoptive father, sends word to her, you've got to do something about this, you're the only hope.

We're about to be slaughtered out here. She sends word back, you know it is against the law to approach the king unbidden. That's against the law.

I may be killed. And he writes back a note, if you don't do this, God will raise up someone else to do it, and you will be lost, just like we will. And she then becomes submissive to her adoptive father, and says please fast for me for three days, and I will go, and this is the most famous line in the book, I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.

In other words, this is not a marginal point in this book, this is central to what this book is about. It's not like I'm picking out a little teeny marginal issue that she did on the side. This is core Esther, core book.

This is what this book is about. Now notice two or three traits of her action. One, the law that she broke did not require any evil of her.

I've dealt with a lot of people over the years that say the only laws you may break are the ones that require you to do evil. That wasn't true with Daniel, and it wasn't true here. At least not if you take the king's law in Daniel's case as forbidding public prayer.

That's number one. Number two, there was no guarantee that her disobedience would be successful. So here was a civil disobedience that was just, if I perish, I perish.

The king could have been so enraged that this Vashti number two has broken into his presence that he says, okay, you and we'll do it tomorrow. We'll get rid of these Jews tomorrow. That could have been a response to that act.

It was a highly risky act of disobedience which only mercy and lifting the golden scepter spared. So those are a few. There are others.

A few illustrations of civil disobedience in the Bible. Now, even if those illustrations weren't there, we'd have some hard questions, wouldn't we, about fulfilling the commandments of Romans and the

commandments of Jesus. And we would ask questions like this.

Is it morally right to jaywalk to stop a rape? Or is it morally right to break the speed limit to rush a bleeding and dying person to the emergency? Or is it right to break in to a neighbor's house because you see smoke coming out of the window and they're on vacation? And on and on and on the questions could go where an apparent simple submission to law that we want to fulfill seems to come into conflict with what justice or with what love would require of us. And so the question is, under what conditions then might you do such things with God's approval? And a person might say, obey God rather than man, Acts 5.29. It's just not that simple, is it? If the law commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, then break it. That would be simple if that's all there were to it.

But the problem is, in the history of civil disobedience and in situations that we can think about, the situation arises where you're not required to do anything evil. It's just that as things go on, so much evil is being done that you wonder whether you need to intervene in a way that would obstruct it. Sitting down on the sidewalk in front of an abortion clinic in 1989 was not explicitly commanded in the Bible.

Many of us did that and were hauled away by the police. Eating at a white-only restaurant in St. Augustine, Florida in 1964 was not explicitly commanded in the Bible by a black person. Marching and praying nonviolently in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 was not explicitly commanded in the Bible, and it was forbidden by certain injunctions.

So in other words, in history, Christians have come to a point where they believed laws were so unjust and so evil and political means had exhausted themselves for so many years with so little effect that peaceful, nonviolent civil disobedience seemed right. So what factors would go into such a decision in view of all that we've seen? And I'm going to suggest four. Four things that you weigh about the situation that you're facing in determining whether you become part of civil disobedience.

Number one, the grievousness or the atrociousness or the degree of outrage of the action sanctioned by law. How atrocious is the action that the law is sanctioning? Is it a traffic pattern you don't like? Or is it millions and millions of babies being killed? Second, the extent of the unjust law's effect. The extent of the effect.

Is it a person here or there being affected by an incidental inconsistency in the law? Or is it millions? The extent. The grievousness, traffic pattern versus murder. The extent, one or two, versus millions.

Third, the potential of civil disobedience to bear clear and effective witness to the truth. The potential of the act to bear clear and effective witness to the truth. And here we're into judgment calls about strategy.

Will sitting here, standing here, doing this or that, have the intended effect? Or only make matters worse? It's a wisdom call, it's a judgment call. And number four, the movement of the spirit of courage and conviction among God's people reaching a flashpoint. The movement of a spirit of courage and conviction among God's people reaching a flashpoint.

Seems to me that historically there are flashpoints of moral indignation in history. An evil exists for years or perhaps generations, as in our own land. And then something strange happens.

One person or tens of thousands of persons suddenly can no longer just get up and go to work and say, I wish it weren't that way. Suddenly something changes in the culture, in the mindset of millions of people. A flashpoint is reached and what had hung in the air for years as tolerable evil, explodes with overwhelming

indignation.

This cannot be! It happened several times in our history. It almost happened in 89, but it didn't happen. And so my question now is, if it can come to such a point, what would it look like? How would you be a part of it? How would it get carried out? Now to answer that question, I'm going to draw Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount into consideration here and talk about the really radical commands of Matthew 5, 38-48.

Somebody read two paragraphs and they're not saying exactly the same thing. How they relate matters. So listen carefully.

This is 38-42 of Matthew 5. You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who asks from you and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. That's one paragraph.

And you hear the main thrust there is comply, don't resist, concede, be passive. Take it. And then comes 43-48 which isn't exactly the same.

You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

For He makes His Son to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. You therefore must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. Now here the note falls not on passivity but on aggressive love.

Like God sends rain, God makes the sun go up. Pray for your enemies for what? Presumably that they be changed. That they be converted.

That they no longer be your enemies. That they go to heaven with you and you be friends with them forever. You are aggressively working towards something new.

Like God sending rain. God sending sun. You are moving.

You are acting. You are not just turning the cheek. This is more.

Not contradictory but more. So in verses 38-42, you've got this note of compliance. Don't resist.

Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. And in verses 43-48, you've got positive actions.

Do good. Like sending rain and sun and prayer. Now the question is, is passivity always the best strategy to do the love required in 43-48? Or is passivity one strategy? And sometimes a warrant for cowardice.

Sometimes a warrant for love. Sometimes it's the perfect strategy for love. And other times it would be a prescription for cowardice.

Now what would make the difference? One of the things that makes the difference is that in most of the situations regarding injustice or persecution, it's more than me who's involved. You've got somebody doing the injustice and you've got 2 or 3 or 10 or 20 or a million people being affected by it. It's not just me.

And the question I'm asking is not simply, okay, what should I do with this slap on the cheek? My question is, what should I do with that slap on the cheek to that widow? I don't think Jesus is addressing that by saying, you turn her other cheek is the only way to love. It might be you stop the hand. So it gets complex, doesn't it? What about the command to give? Give to him who asks, should you give your coat to a man who's going to strangle an infant with it? Somebody wants your coat, give him your cloak as well so he can strangle two babies.

What about the person who asks you to go the extra mile so that you will participate in his bloodshed? Come with me, we're going to do some really good evil together. I want you to go with me. So what's Jesus doing in these words? Jesus in these words, I think, is describing a form of love that we should exercise most of the time.

And he's describing it in a way that cuts to the root of our selfishness and the root of our fear. If selfishness and fear keep you from giving your coat or going the extra mile, you should be broken by these words. You should be open and laid bare as the selfish, fearful person you are and not in any way minimize these words.

Twist them to mean something else. These words are directed at selfishness and fear that keeps us from giving to those who ask, keeps us from going with those who demand our help when they're a soldier who demands that you carry his stuff an extra mile. But, is compliance always the form of love that deals with injustice when not just you are compromised, but others? Flashpoint again.

When love weighs the claims of justice and mercy for all the people involved, there can come a moment, there may come a moment, a flashpoint, when love goes beyond passive, compliant, non-resistance and drives the money changers out of the temple. So what guidelines for how to do it if you decide that's what you must do? These words of Jesus banish vindictiveness from all our action. They banish malice.

They undermine mere expediency of personal safety. The reason I'm not churning my other cheek is just because I don't like being smacked. Jesus says that's not a very good reason.

The Lord cuts away our love of possessions. It's my coat! And our love of convenience. I don't have time to go an extra mile for goodness sakes.

That's the point of verses 38-42. Strip us of invictiveness. Strip us of our love affair with personal safety.

Strip us of our love affair with possession. Strip us of our love affair with convenience. Jesus is going to the root here.

He's not setting up only one form of love. He's describing the form that will penetrate most deeply to our selfishness and our worldliness, our world-likeness. Instead, I think He would say, and this is what shapes your civil disobedience, become the kind of person who is utterly free from these things to live for others.

Both the oppressed and the oppressor. Both the persecuted and the persecutor. Both the dying children and the killing abortionists.

The tone and the demeanor of this Christian civil disobedience will be the opposite. This is why things came apart in 89, I believe. It will be the opposite of strident, belligerent, rock-throwing, screaming, swearing, violent demonstrations.

Hey, hey, ho, ho! We're creative, don't you know? They're not. It sounds ridiculous. It's not the way we do it.

It's not going to work. So there is a way. We are people of the cross.

Our Lord submitted to crucifixion willingly to save His enemies. Can you imagine? Hell no, I won't go to the cross! Can you imagine? Can you imagine even the tone? We are people of the cross. Our sins have been forgiven by One who gave Himself up without resistance to the wickedest authorities that ever were.

This takes the swagger. This takes the swagger out of our protest. I have a deep concern for the religious right.

I do. I'm not excited to be identified with it by and large. We'll talk about this more next week.

I don't like the swagger. When you get interviewed like so-and-so this morning on public radio, I want to hear Christ! I want to hear blood! I want to hear death, brokenness, sinners, helpless. Don't you want to believe Miss So-and-So on public radio? Instead of just kind of these cocky, sound-like-the-world, let's-all-get-together answers.

We are forgiven sinners. It takes the swagger out of the protest. It takes arrogance out of our resistance.

And if after every other means has failed, we must disobey for the sake of love or justice, we will first take hold of the log that is in our eye. And we will pull it out. And it will hurt so bad and bring so many tears to our face as we're pulling the log out of our eye that crucified our Savior.

These tears will go down onto all of our anger and it will soften and mellow us. Not make us wimpy, but it will make us free from the stridency and the bitterness and the malice and the arrogance and the uppity-ness. There will be a flavor about Christ-like people when they kneel before an abortion clinic or in Montgomery, Alabama or wherever or whatever that will be more ready to suffer than to demand its rights.

Daniel was willing to go to the den. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were willing to go to the flames. Peter was willing to go to jail.

Paul was willing to go to jail. They never drew the sword. Put it away.

Those who live by the sword will die by the sword, Peter. Let's pray. Father, we want to be servants.

We want to be known as people who take up their cross daily and follow You. Whoever would come after me, let him take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will save it.

For what is the profit of man if he gains the whole world and loses his life? O Lord God, make Bethlehem, indeed make the whole evangelical Bible-believing cause in America, have a flavor about it which is not wimpy but is brokenhearted, is meek and humble, and is really quick and ready to submit to every law as much as we possibly can with a clear conscience. And that's 99.9% of them. So God, don't let us become a rebellious people.

Take away our swagger. Make us humble. Make us, I pray, servants, meek and lowly in response to the cross, in response to injustice against us, and courageous in our interactions for the cause of others.

I pray in Jesus' name. I pray in Jesus' name. This is Desiring God, 2601 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406.

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