

The Limits of Submission to Man

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon calls Christians to submit to governing authorities only within the limits of Christ's Lordship, emphasizing the need for discernment in obedience and civil disobedience.

Duration: 26:13

Scripture: Romans 13:1

Topics: "Civil Obedience", "Godly Authority"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Romans 13:1-7, which discusses the importance of submitting to governing authorities. The main argument presented is that all governing authority has been ordained by God, and resisting such authority is equivalent to resisting God and incurring His wrath. The speaker acknowledges that this text can be problematic and has been used to justify conformity to unjust systems. However, they argue that Paul's statement in verse 3, which suggests that rulers are not a terror to good, needs to be qualified in light of the miscarriage of justice and the death of Jesus. The speaker emphasizes that while Paul acknowledges the failure of governments to always reward good and punish evil, it is still important to submit to governing authorities to avoid a bad conscience and the wrath of the government.

Transcript

A vision for our church and for the Baptist General Conference and for the Church of Jesus Christ in general. A vision of the church as a group of people who are sojourners, aliens, exiles, refugees in this world, to use some New Testament words to describe them. A happy, peaceful, loving people who confess allegiance to a foreign king, Jesus Christ, and Him only.

A people who reside in every nation in the world, but whose all-determining citizenship is in heaven, from where we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. I have a vision of a church as the freest of all peoples, free from guilt and free from greed and free from fear, because our kingdom cannot be shaken, as Hebrews says. The city for which we hope has God for its builder and its maker, whose fatherland is heaven and heaven only.

I see the church as a free people because our minds are not conformed to this age, but are being transformed by the mercies of God, so that we are not enslaved to fashion and fad or any other form of covetousness. I have a vision of the church as a people with strong desires, not shaped by the persuaders of this world, but shaped by messages coming from the fatherland. Oh, for a church with a single, radical allegiance to the one King who said, my kingdom is not of this world.

I think one of the great, crucial issues before the church in this country and around the world today is, shall we here be American with a pinch of religious flavoring, or shall we be Christ's people with a pinch of American flavoring? And I think that's a crucial question for the church in our land today, because there are a lot of people who have not seriously asked themselves this question, am I more American than I am Christian? I'm not too worried about people who are seriously asking themselves that question and struggling with that dilemma, but there are a lot who haven't. Are there not impulses in our society by which we, by the world, are identified as Christians and which influence us daily, and yet which are incompatible with the Christ life and the cross life? Are we not constantly being shaped by forces in our American society which make it almost impossible for people to recognize in us anything distinct from the world? I think if we're going to appear as aliens and exiles in the world and in America, we're going to have to go back and renew our original declaration by which we became Christians, namely, Jesus is Lord. And we're going to have to wake up to the fact or remind ourselves of something that we've already been awakened to, namely that this is a cultural and a political statement, not just a private and individual statement.

It is a radical declaration of independence from our culture and a radical declaration of allegiance to one king, a foreign king, Jesus Christ the Lord. Therefore, the point of my message today is to call us as a congregation of Americans to have our allegiance and to submit to Christ only as king. And whatever other submission that we may give to men, to give it within the limits of the Lordship of Christ and to give it for his sake only.

That's the main point. And the text that I want us to focus on is Romans 13, verses one to seven. So if you have your Bibles or want to use one in the pew, turn with me to Romans 13, verses one to seven.

This text really concerns me. It is a problematical text. And I think you'll see why if you look at it closely.

It has been used, for example, to justify unseemly conformity to the status quo, both in this country and abroad. It was used to keep the church docile to the Nazi regime in Germany in the Second World War. And it has been used to impede the efforts in this country of those who have worked for equal rights for all races.

And I want us to look closely to see what Paul is really teaching here, to see whether those uses are really abuses of this text. 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, he who resists the authorities resists what 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 him who is an 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. He is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, summing up, one must be subject not only to avoid wrath, but also for the sake of conscience.

We'll stop there. I think that's the end of the argument. Then he gives some examples of taxation and so on.

The argument has three main steps. Step one is found in the second half of verse one. All governing authority has been ordained and instituted by God.

That's the basic premise of everything Paul has to say here. Step two in the argument is found in verse two. Therefore, if you resist this God ordained government, you find yourself resisting God and you're going to incur wrath.

In other words, you run into two things. You're going to have a bad conscience because you know you're opposing God and you're going to get zapped because the government will not tolerate that kind of opposition. You will be punished.

Then the third stage in the argument stated in verse one. It's also stated in verse five. Therefore, to avoid a bad conscience and to avoid incurring the wrath of the government, be subject to the governing authorities.

That's the main argument. It's very simple. I believe that all scripture is inspired by God is profitable for instruction, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God might be fully equipped, complete and equipped for every good work.

And that includes this text. The problem is there are lots of other texts in the Bible that don't fit very easily with this seemingly simple call to be subject to whatever government exists. And those texts, too, we confess to be inspired by God and profitable for instruction.

So if we want to honor the whole Bible as God's word, we have to ask the question, how do they fit together? And that's what I want to do. There is a long tradition, a respected tradition in biblical history of civil disobedience, and it starts in Exodus chapter one. You remember this story, probably.

The Israelites had lived now for going on four centuries in Egypt. They had multiplied and become a great people. They were under the authority of the Pharaohs.

Pharaohs had come and gone. Now a king ruled, which was nervous. These Israelites are multiplying too fast.

They're going to take us over. There are too many of them. We must somehow get some birth control here.

And the way he decides to get birth control is to kill all the boy babies. So he tells the Hebrew midwives, every time a boy is born to the Israelites, kill him. And if a girl is born, that's okay.

The Hebrew midwives, it says in verse 17 of Exodus 1, feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. And then verse 20 adds, so God dealt well with the midwives and the people multiplied and grew strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

It seems to me very clear that these women were not subject to the governing authorities in Egypt under whom they lived. In fact, they saw the command of the king, not as an expression of the command of God who had ordained the authority, but as in conflict with the command of God. And therefore they disobeyed the king, obeyed God and God approved and gave them families.

Two other instances are found in the book of Daniel. You remember both of these stories. They're even more familiar.

King Nebuchadnezzar, not a good king, but king nevertheless, made a royal decree over all those under his authority. The decree was that if you hear the music of the sackbut and the lyre, you must bow down to this golden image that I have placed up here on the land. And of course, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not do it.

So he throws them into the fiery furnace and God saves them because he approved of their disobedience of the king's decree and he brings them out and there's a conversion and the king declares a new edict that his God is not God. And that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is God. Then in chapter six of Daniel, Darius, another king over that empire, establishes an edict for 30 days.

No one shall make any petition to a man or a God, but only to me. Daniel, the text, the way the text puts this is so interesting. It says in chapter six, verse 10, when Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where there were windows in his upper chamber toward Jerusalem and he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God as he had done previously.

The way the text is stated is to show how blatantly he was going to define this decree that Darius had stated. And so he gets thrown to the lions and again God saves his man because he approved of his civil disobedience. You come over into the New Testament and the texts were read from Acts when Peter and John were arrested by the duly established Jewish authorities who had the right to do that sort of a thing in Judea, they were commanded, do not speak or teach in this name.

And they answered in Acts four, 19, whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you or to God, you judge, but we're going to speak of what we've seen and heard. So they go ahead and do it. They get clapped in jail again.

The angel lets them out, they go out and preach, bring them back in. The high priest says, what are you doing spreading this teaching? We have told you, you may not do this. Peter responds in Acts 5, 28, we must obey God rather than men.

In other words, the voice of the authority is not the same as the voice of God in Peter's understanding of the authorities. Now, all of that tradition, we can take it right over into the book of Revelation as well and right on through church history, Domitian, Bloody Mary, et cetera. That makes it very hard to say that the Bible teaches that since all governing authority is ordained and appointed by God, therefore it should be obeyed as from God.

It's not that simple. In fact, these stories make Romans 13 look on the surface incredibly naive. How could Paul say rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad? How could he say, do what is good and you will receive approval? If there weren't some other things that Paul had written, we might think that he just lived in a dream world where good was always rewarded and evil was always punished and governments did exactly what they were supposed to do.

But Paul said some other things which show that he was not living in a dream world. For example, 1 Corinthians 2 verse 8, he said, none of the rulers of this age understood the wisdom of God, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. Paul was keenly aware that the death of our Lord Jesus was the ultimate breach of justice, the ultimate failure of a government to reward the good and punish the evil.

They didn't. The rulers did just the opposite. And if he knew that, he also knew from his own experience in the book of Acts that local governments could menace his ministry, for example, in Philippi, just as much as they could enforce and protect his ministry.

So what are we to make of Romans 13, 1 to 5, which calls for subjection to the governing authorities? Let's take these premises. Is the first and basic premise wrong? Could that be the problem? That really it's not all authorities that are ordained by God, it's just the good governments. Those are the ones who are instituted by God, the ones that reward the good and punish the wrong.

With Paul's view of the sovereignty of God over the world, I don't think he would say that. I don't think he would give up this truth stated so absolutely in verse 1, namely that all authority is from God. All authority does come from God, and this can be shown outside of Paul's writings from two places, one from Daniel and one from the Gospel of John.

Daniel, we know, presents evil kings, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Artaxerxes. These are evil kings that did a lot of harm to God's people. And yet, listen to what Daniel says.

He confesses in chapter 2, verse 21, it is God who removes kings and sets kings up. And in chapter 4, verse 32, the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He wills. And that includes Nebuchadnezzar and Darius.

So that it's not right to say, at least on the basis of Daniel, that only the good kings are established by God. The bad kings manage to get their authority some other way. And then John, in chapter 19 of his Gospel, shows the same thing by recording what Jesus said.

Jesus was arrested. He was brought before Pilate. Pilate had authority in Judea.

He was using it wrongly. Ultimately, it goes back to him that our Lord was handed over to be crucified. That was a great breach of justice.

Pilate said to Jesus, do you not know, in John 19, 10, do you not know that I have authority to release you and crucify you? And Jesus answered, you would have no authority at all unless it had been given to you from above. So, the first principle stands. All authority, the worst to the best, is ordained and established by God.

No king in this world can say arrogantly, I have my authority by my own power and my own right. He must humbly confess, I have reached this place only because of God's sovereign, providential guidance of history. So, what are we going to say then about Romans 13, 1-5? The verse that needs to be qualified, and I think Paul wants to be qualified, though he doesn't make it explicit, is verse 3. In view of what Paul knows about the miscarriage of justice and the death of Jesus, and about his own encounter of injustice, I do not think he could have meant it as an absolute fact, with no exceptions, that rulers are not a terror to good, and that if you do good, you'll only receive praise.

Paul knew better. And therefore, it seems to me that this statement is meant by Paul to be a general statement of how governments should and generally do act. It's not an absolute statement of the way governments always act.

It seems that Paul simply does not have in view the problem of evil governments. He doesn't even raise that problem here, which is what creates the problem for us. He's simply not talking about the problem of

when governments abuse their God-ordained right of authority.

He seems to have in view instead relatively good governments that do, in general, reward the good and punish the evil. Now, if that's correct, if Paul would allow that qualification of verse 3, then no longer can we say that it's an absolute statement that we should always be subject to the governing authorities. Because if verse 3 is qualified, then the ground of the command, be subject, is qualified, and we have to ask, what sort of government, what sort of law, what sort of edict shall we obey and shall we not? If the authorities ever begin to punish the good and reward the bad, our submission to them is going to come into conflict with submission to God.

So the command to be subject in verses 1 and 5 is not absolute. It depends upon whether subjection involves doing wrong, disobeying Jesus. The ultimate criterion of right and wrong is not whether we are commanded to do it by the state, but whether we are commanded to do it by God, whether it involves obedience to some command of His.

It is right to resist what God has ordained in order to obey what God has commanded. Let me repeat that sentence because that is very crucial. It is right to resist what God has ordained in order to obey what God has commanded.

Pharaoh was ordained. Nebuchadnezzar was ordained of God. Darius was ordained.

Pilate was ordained. Domitian, who demanded that Christians at the end of the first century call him Lord, was ordained. Bloody Mary, who killed Protestants in the seventeenth century, was ordained.

Hitler was ordained. Idi Amin was ordained. But not to be obeyed.

It seems to me that probably the best way to handle the fact that God rules in history and allows such men to find their way to power is that we are being tested. Just in the same way that in Deuteronomy 13 He allows false prophets to come, that you may be tested. We are being tested to see whether we will try to save our lives and be subject to the atrocities of the ruling power or whether we will say with Peter, we must obey God rather than men and risk the losing of our lives.

So when verse 5 says we are to be subject in order to avoid wrath, it means the wrath that comes upon evil, not the wrath that may come upon good. 1 Peter puts it like this. Peter is a little more explicit than Paul.

In 1 Peter 4.15 it says, let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a wrongdoer, or a mischief maker. That's the same thing Paul was saying. Do good and you won't suffer.

In general, governments don't punish those who don't murder, don't take what doesn't belong to them, don't do wrong, etc. But then he goes on and says, yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God. In other words, strive to avoid incurring the wrath of a government by doing wrong, but if you incur the wrath of a government because you do right, don't have a bad conscience, but glorify God.

So we can sum up what we've said in three statements. One, all authority is indeed ordained and instituted by God. Nevertheless, two, rulers and governments are sometimes good, sometimes bad.

Sometimes they reward what is good and punish what is bad. Sometimes they do just the reverse so that the first premise, all authority is ordained by God, does not result in the inference, therefore obey everything they say. And third, the demand for subjection is relative, not absolute.

It depends on whether the government demands something that is contrary to what Jesus commands. If the demands of the state do not require us to obey, disobey Jesus, as for example with speed limits, stop signs, income taxes, building codes, fishing licenses, and hundreds of other commands, we will be law-abiding. Christians will pay their taxes.

They will not fudge on building codes. They will buy fishing licenses. They will keep the speed limits.

They will come in at the curfew time. They will set the temperature in their building at the right point. We will not be a rebellious, recalcitrant people.

We will be law-abiding wherever it is not in conflict with what Jesus teaches. But even when we submit, we will do it for Jesus' sake. That's crucial.

That's the main point. Just as for Jesus' sake we may have to disobey, so all of our obedience to our government should be for Jesus' sake and not just for the government's sake. We never have two masters, only one master.

Even in our serving, we should be giving expression to our yieldedness to the Lordship of Jesus. Every law that we say yes to ought to be a yes to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And if Jesus is that much with us, then I'm sure that my vision for the Church as a happy, peaceful, loving people who are aliens and exiles in the world will become a reality.

And that's my prayer for our Church here.

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