

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

by John Piper

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*Paul calls for submission to civil authorities because it's instituted by God, it's good for you, you'll get punished if you don't, and your conscience should condemn you if you do things that the government should count worthy of punishment.*

**Duration:** 46:17

**Scripture:** Romans 13:1-7, Hebrews 10:24

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

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the topic of submission to government authorities. He begins by drawing a parallel between the Declaration of Independence and the teachings of Romans 13, highlighting the idea that governments derive their power from the consent of the governed. The preacher then emphasizes the importance of obeying various laws and regulations, using examples such as paying taxes, respecting authority figures, and following traffic rules. He also mentions the consequences of disobedience, including punishment and the role of government as an avenger of God's wrath. Overall, the sermon emphasizes the need for Christians to submit to civil authorities and obey the laws of the land.

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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). The scripture text for this evening is found in Romans chapter 13, starting in verse 1 through verse 7. If you'd like to follow along in your pew Bible, you can find it on page 948. Romans chapter 13, beginning in verse 1. 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 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 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 or 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. Father in heaven, we want to exalt over your word together, whether it's on Saturday evening or whether it's Lord's Day morning in Mounds View. I want to be together in this, and so I ask that you would do a great work here Saturday evening and here Lord's Day morning.

Let time be mysteriously collapsed in your own power and reckoning so that what you are pleased to do savingly in healing, reconciling, encouraging, humbling, guiding, you do together, collapsing those 15 hours as it were into nothing. Help me Father now to be faithful to this word. It's a puzzling word to me.

I don't have the last word. You have the last word. Let me be a good echo of Romans 13 verses 1 to 7. I ask this in Jesus name.

Amen. This is part two of a three-part series on these seven verses. So the first part was what, three weeks ago or so? We took a couple of weeks to do other things.

And now we're back, and as I worked on it, I said I'm going to need one more week on these verses besides this week. And so if you're newer and you want to be caught up to speed, go to the website and look at last time. And if you're with us, I hope you'll be back next time in order to get the full picture.

Millions of Christians around the world today live under civil authorities who forbid them to do what the Bible commands and command them to do what the Bible forbids. One example. The Bible says in Hebrews 10.24, let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together.

As is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near. So the Bible clearly intends, meet together Christians. Don't neglect to meet together.

Meet in small groups if you must. Meet in larger assemblies, but don't fail to be a together people to stir each other up in those smaller or larger times of togetherness. And there are China, North Korea, Vietnam, various Islamic states where the simple obedience to that command is civil disobedience at the risk of your freedom if you don't toe the line just the way they say.

So we're aware of that reality, which raises a problem for these verses. Verse one says so plainly, let every person be subject to the governing authorities. Verse five.

Therefore, one must be in subjection. Verse seven. Pay to all what is owed 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 Saint Paul is calling us to submit to civil authorities. And on the surface of it, there's no qualification.

The statements seem to be absolute, no exceptions. Now, before we consider, which is what we're going to do tonight and this morning, before we consider this, namely, why does he talk like this? Why does he say it this absolute, no exceptions kind of way when we know, he knows and we know that in the Bible and in history, he would approve of some state disobedience. So why talk like this when very nearby in the

Bible? That's not the way it is.

So before we do that, that's where we're going to go. I want to give you four reasons from this text why he's calling for submission to state authority. Number one.

It's found in verse one, second half of the verse, it's the main one, the others flow from this. You see the middle of the verse there in verse one, for there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God. That's the ground of our submission, he says.

Then look at verse two, because it implies this. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. Or look at verse four, first part of the verse.

He that is the civil magistrate, president, governor, mayor, policeman, whatever he is, God's servant. Look at verse six, second half of the verse for another name for servant. The authorities are ministers of God to all those.

Verse one, all authorities from God. Verse two, resist it. You resist God.

Verse four, they're servants of God. Verse six, they're ministers of God. So reason number one for submitting is it's all of God.

Don't resist God. Reason number two, these ministers exist for our good. We talked about this last time.

This was the main point. Verse four, for he is God's servant for your good. It is good for us that every person doesn't do what is right in his own eyes.

Anarchy is worse than even bad government. You would not want to be the victim of vigilante mob rule. I promise you, you would not want that.

A little parenthesis, one of the reasons totalitarian governments arise is because people refuse to morally govern themselves. Things get so out of hand, they'll let anybody be king if they'll just clamp down on the mobs. And that's the way totalitarianism emerges.

Argument number three, you're going to be in big trouble with the sword if you disobey the government. Verse four, second half of the verse. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he, that is the president, the governor, the head, 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.

So reason number three for submitting is you're going to get your head chopped off maybe if you don't or go to prison or get a fine or something. In other words, punishment is an incentive to submit and it's supposed to be. Number four, last one.

Beneath and above civil authority, there is a greater reality called the moral law of God expressed in these words, right and wrong. And if you do something that brings down the wrath of the state, Paul seems to be assuming, you have offended against that law and your conscience should condemn you, not just the sword. Verse three, for rulers are not a terror to good conduct, good, but to bad.

That's very significant. It sounds wildly overstated, but note the clear implication. Might does not make right in this text.

You see this. Rulers are not a terror to good conduct. Good conduct is a reality out here.

Government is here and government is supposed to praise and reward that. And then badness and wrong is a reality out here. Government's over here and government is supposed to punish that.

Those are not the same. This is a moral reality in the universe to which this government is to conform. Might does not make right.

That's one of the massive implications of this text, and it's one of the reasons why there will be such a thing as civil disobedience, which is all next week. But the main thing I want you to see here, let's go on reading in in verse three, let's continue. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority, then do what is good.

Notice good is not being defined as submission. Good is what you do, and if a government is functioning in the way this text is describing, it approves of that good. The good is a reality out here and the submission is what it should be defined as.

When you do good, you should be submitting. Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval. So the good is something that's different from his approval.

His approval does not define the good. The good is defined by God, and the government is supposed to bring its rewarding and punishing into conformity with the good and the evil. That's what's being described here.

You will receive his approval, verse four, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid. So I think it is clear from this text that there is a moral law of God independent of the state, and the government should call submission doing of that moral law so that it can reward that.

It can't say submission defines the right. It doesn't. The right is defined by God, and when it's done, the state ought to call that submission.

That's what's implied in those words about good and bad and right and wrong. Now we come to verse five with the implications of that. Therefore, one must be in subjection not only to avoid wrath, the sword, God's wrath expressed through the government, but also for the sake of conscience.

Where'd that come from? It came from this reality. There's the power of the state, and you don't want to tangle with the right of a governor to throw you in the clamor. You just want to stay out of his way.

So submit. But there's another whole thing going on here, namely this conscience issue, which is there's a right and wrong out here written by God on your heart, and you're supposed to conform to that, and your conscience ought to condemn you if you don't, whatever the government says. So those are the four reasons for submission, and the grand conclusion is in verse seven.

So 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, speed limits to whom speed limits are owed, building codes to whom building codes are due, fishing license fees to whom fishing license fees are due, hunt deer only in season, keep only five trout in southeast Minnesota, one of them being 16 inches long only, no trapping of birds in the city limits or squirrel shooting in the city limits, keep your grass cut, no debris behind your garage, no loud mufflers, keep your emissions under control, fasten your seat

belt, egress windows in the basement if you live down there, shovel your front walk so you don't get tagged, and don't park more than two hours on the street outside the church. I don't know if you ever let it hit you how many laws we are governed by. Here's a little fun thing to do.

Go to the internet and just type in your browser City Ordinances Minneapolis. Put that in Google. Then follow it out.

They got a law about ferrets. I said that to my wife. She said, I don't even know what a ferret is.

There are thousands of laws governing us which you can be fined if you don't do them and they are by and large good for us and we should be thankful for them. I'll give you a little story from my vacation to show how ordinances are good for you. This is a little parable.

Don't push it beyond what it is. It's me and Talitha going fishing in New York on Lake Chautauqua. Now the night before the people whose cabin we were staying at said, have you tried fishing off the end of the dock? I said, no, it didn't look like there's any fish down there to me.

I looked, I didn't see any. That's not a good way to judge. He said, well there are, there are, and there's two fishing poles in the garage and, and, and you can go and, and Talitha wouldn't even need a fishing license.

So I heard between the lines, I need a fishing license. I'm not going to buy a fishing license. We're going to fish one afternoon.

So the question is, we're on a dock. There's nobody in a zillion miles. I can see boats a thousand miles away and, and so should I just throw my line in? No way am I going to be caught.

And of course, you know, I had preached this sermon a week before and my conscience is sensitive and, and besides I, I trust God and so I took both poles out there. I went next door and got some night crawlers, 12 of them, chopped them into three pieces. Hooks were little and, uh, and I put on the hook and showed her how to throw it out.

She threw it out. She caught a fish instantaneously after every cast. And all I did was stand there and take these fish off the hook and put a worm back on.

She had the best time she's ever had fishing. She thought fishing is the greatest thing in the world. Don't have to put a worm on, don't have to take the fish off, just throw it in.

Daddy does the dirty work and I reel them in. And you know what would have happened if I had cheated and said, I'm going to put a whole worm on my hook and get a big one. None of these little sunnies and little half breeds.

I'm going to, I'm going to get a big fish. You know what would have happened? She's reeling them in saying, Daddy, help me. And I'm going to get really mad.

I'm trying to fish. And the whole morning would have been ruined because there would have been this competition. I want to catch a big fish.

I don't since I had resolved, I'm just going to be there for Talitha and we're gonna have the best morning of our vacation. God served us well with a fishing license rule. Just a parable.

So why don't you try keeping the speed limit? You just might arrive at a God-appointed moment, absolutely perfect. And a few other suggestions. The argument of this text is clear.

Submit to civil authority. One, because it's instituted by God. Two, because it's good for you.

Three, because you'll get punished if you don't. And four, because your conscience should condemn you if you do things that the government should count worthy of punishment. Now, here we are at this critical problem facing our understanding.

Historically and biblically, we know that civil authorities do not always reward the good. Civil authorities do not always punish the bad. Many times in history, civil authorities have punished the good and rewarded the bad.

We know that. And we know it from the Bible. I'm not taking my experience and saying, you can't mean this, Paul, because I have had a different experience.

That's a bad way to do Bible interpretation. I'm going to show you next week about five instances of biblical civil disobedience that force me to say, Paul, you know your Old Testament better than I do. You know the book of Acts better than I do.

You know governments punish good behavior and you know governments reward bad behavior sometimes. So why are you talking so sweepingly like this? That's the key question. And here are the questions we've got to raise.

Two of them I'll try to answer next time. One, what is the biblical evidence that God sometimes approves of civil disobedience? Two, if He does, what should it look like and when is it legitimate? That's next week, God willing. Third, and this is the one we'll finish with now, why, Paul, do you talk in the way you talk in such broad, sweeping, unqualified ways about submission? Before I do that, let me just observe this is not theoretical.

If some of you are kind of sitting there thinking, I think the revolution's over, you know, and we're just here, so why is this relevant? It's relevant for lots of reasons. Some of them are at a distance, and we have brothers and sisters in communist countries like China, North Korea, Vietnam, Islamic states, who simply to be an obedient Christian can get you into civil trouble. And historically, it should interest us and probably exercise our minds that America is defined at all of her key junctures as a people who had to qualify Romans 13 in order to be.

And just give you the three examples that stand out most clearly. The revolution, that isn't it remarkable that this sermon in God's providence planned months ago has landed on this weekend? We're all celebrating the Declaration of Independence, which is, let me just read you, let me read you some of the Declaration of Independence, if it sounds like Romans 13. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Hmm. Hmm. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Now I think if you read that carefully, you can hear the roots of the Declaration of Independence, and it is not Romans 13. Not saying it couldn't somehow be brought into conformity, I'm simply saying that's not the root of this document. The root of this document is man-centered deism of Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin.

That's the root of this document, the man-centered deism of Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin. They were not believers. They rejected the deity of Christ, and so you get words like governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Man is supreme in the governing of man. In their thinking. Romans 13 says that governments derive their just powers from God.

Boy, this is huge, isn't it? This is huge politically and philosophically. It is probably true. I will tip my hand and say I believe it's true that democracy is the best kind of government to protect from the tyrannical opposition to God that rules in every human heart, apart from Christ.

I'll say that again. My judgment, and I'm not infallible here, is my personal, historical, biblically informed judgment that democracy, some form of Republican democracy, is probably the best government for protecting us from the tyranny, the tyrannical opposition against God found in every human heart without Christ. In other words, the reason I'm in favor of democracy is not because men are so good, but because they're so bad.

I'm just joining C.S. Lewis that democracy does not echo the value and wisdom and thoughtfulness of people to rule themselves. It echoes the fact that if you don't let everybody check everybody, somebody is going to become a tyrant against God and their fellows. Witness the 20th century, the bloodiest century in the history of the world, because of the likes of Hitler and Stalin and Mussolini and Pol Pot and Idi Amin and on and on.

Oh, the carnage of tyranny. Democracy is a precious thing to restrain singular evil, but that's political philosophizing. Don't find that in the Bible.

I think Christians can be wonderful Christians under regimes that are very different from that. Therefore, we should never equate the kingdom of God with any political form of government. Let the world think that we do.

So wherever you come down and how you explain the Declaration of Independence, all I'm illustrating is this. The existence and the shaping of our American reality hinges on the way we handle Romans 13. Example number two, it's funny how our country has these 100 year sequences.

100 years later, tell me the big issue 100 years later, the Civil War and the issue in the Civil War or war between the states, depending where you're from, is must states submit to the laws of the Union, especially laws about slavery. And we killed 500,000 of each other over that almost second. No, it is the bloodiest war we've ever been in.

The third is 100 years later. And what was that? The civil rights movement. What was the civil rights movement? It was the question whether segregation laws, you may not go into that restroom or that restaurant or drink at that fountain because of the color of your skin, whether those laws are so morally repugnant to the moral law that a people are justified in peaceful, nonviolent disobedience.

That was the question. America, it's amazing, America is defined by our response to Romans 13 and how we handled it. This is not a theoretical thing for me.

I preached on these things in the late 80s when we were sitting in front of abortion clinics and going to jail. And the day will come perhaps when we'll do it again. I'll just give you one illustration.

How's your imagination with where we're heading as a country? You can just pick some things. I'll pick one that you don't expect me to pick. You think I'm going to pick homosexuality or marriage or something.

And it's true. We're going to go there probably. But I'm going to pick just spanking because of how real it is in 11 countries of the world, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Germany, Latvia.

11 countries have laws against spanking your children. Not cool. If America goes there, I will not stop spanking if Talith is young enough still.

And I will preach publicly at risk to my freedom that no Christian parents should obey that law. I will preach that. I will stand on the housetops and preach against that law and call for civil disobedience in the home.

So this is really relevant to me. This is a big deal, this issue of how to understand Romans 13. It really matters.

So the three questions are two for next week and one more briefly now. Two questions for next week are what's the evidence, Piper, for believing that God sometimes approves of civil disobedience? What's the biblical evidence of that? And number two, if you persuade us that that's the case, when and what should it look like? But for our remaining time here, the question is, can I provide any help for why Paul would speak in verses one to seven with such broad strokes without any seeming qualifications? That's my biggest question. Why? Because I think I can get inside Paul's head in view of the larger picture of his writings to say, you don't mean it that absolutely that the government always approves the right, it always punishes the wrong, and therefore submission always accords with the moral law.

You know that's not the case, Paul. So why are you writing like this? Now, I'm just going to try three suggested explanations for you, and you have to judge. I feel like I'm struggling here, and I'm not speaking these three points as crystal clear in the Bible.

In fact, they're not in the Bible. They're my effort to understand why the Bible is the way it is. So you judge as to whether or not you think these three explanations for why Paul might write the way he's writing help us come to terms with the way he's done it.

Number one, I think that Paul in writing to the Christians in Rome, especially as you recall, writing about what five or so years after all the Jews and many Christians were expelled from Rome. We know that because of the book of Acts. I think Paul is writing in a situation where he's keenly aware that his letters will be read by Caesar's household.

And Caesar himself and the authorities who want to know what Christians think about government and how they're going to behave and are they revolutionaries and does Jesus Christ is Lord mean Caesar should be opposed and brought down from his throne? I think those are the kinds of questions that are probably swirling in Rome in these days. And so I think Paul has in mind, how might this be read by the civil authorities and not just by the by the Christian? And I think he has two truths that he wants. Rulers to draw out of this paragraph, here's one.

Christians are not out to overthrow the empire politically by claiming Jesus is Lord and not Caesar. They say that, but when they say it, they don't mean they're going to mount an army and march against the praetorium. Christians submit to laws, they pay their taxes, they show respect, they do good in the community.

Leave us alone. Just leave us alone. We are not revolutionaries against your throne.

We are harmless lovers of lost people, hurting people. We do much good in your empire. Would you please just leave us alone? I think that's what he wanted the governors to hear, which may go a long way to accounting for why he would say it the way he said it.

Here's my second suggestion. The other truth that he wants government to hear, and this is a little more controversial for the governors, way more controversial, is you're not God, Caesar. God is God and you're dependent on him.

Verse one, there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God. Now, I'm tending to read this wondering, how will Christians hear and respond to this? And that's proper because it's who he's writing to mainly. But picture yourself being Caesar reading that sentence.

What? I'm here like a puppet. There's a God over me, raises me up, puts me down, chooses how long I rule. Right, Caesar.

Know that about yourself and your government. When God wants you down, you're down. And you're there only at his wish.

I think that's what Paul wants them to hear. Both God's sovereignty and God's moral law are over you. So the absoluteness of the statements may be designed to leave Caesar no wiggle room, not to leave the church no wiggle room.

God, Caesar, is absolutely above you. No exceptions at all. No wiggle room whatsoever.

But that very fact creates wiggle room probably for Christians because Christians now seeing that there's an authority here and an authority here will know that they don't always jive. And that this one, God, is the supreme authority. Caesar needs to know there's no exception to this.

It's the way it is. He's always over you. And then there's this moral law dimension that Paul wants Caesar to be aware of.

Let's read verse three. Rulers are not a terror to good conduct. You hear that, Caesar? But to bad? Would you have no fear of the one who's in authority? Do what is good and you'll receive his approval.

Do you hear that, Caesar? You hear God's call upon you. Good behavior is the measure of your authority. Use your authority to endorse that.

It is over you. So not only is the sovereignty of God over Caesar, the moral law of God is over Caesar. I think those are two things, two truths that Paul really wants the praetorian guard and all the rulers in Rome to be keenly aware of and in a very Christian-directed way, stated with broad sweeping strokes, he's saying, know this, God is over you, Caesar, and know this, the moral law is over you, Caesar, is the third reason I think he speaks this way.

And with this, I'm drawing to a close. It's relevant, I think, for this weekend that we are about to celebrate. I think Paul probably is willing to risk misunderstanding in calling for submission without qualification because in Paul's mind, he is more concerned with our humility and self-denial and trust in Christ than with our civil liberties.

That's risky, isn't it? And I believe that with all my heart. I believe Paul is more burdened by whether Christians are humble, self-denying, people-serving, Christ-trusting people than that they get justice from Caesar. Because he knows what Jesus said.

They're going to throw some of you in jail. They're going to kill some of you. If they call the master of the house Beelzebul, Satan, how much more are they going to malign those of his own household? It's not going to go well for you.

Jesus never promised his church a fair fight. He promised them the opposite. So here's the reason I think Paul, if he had to rank the two, and he does rank them I believe, we get all of our rights from Caesar or we are totally faithful to Jesus, humble and kind and loving.

If he had to rank those, he's going to rank them like this because nobody ever went to hell because they didn't get their civil rights. And everybody goes to hell because they're arrogant and proud and self-reliant and not trusting in Jesus and not caring about other people. And therefore when you've got a rank, what's the most important thing? Whether Christians get their civil rights or whether they are trusting Jesus and walking faithfully and suffering willingly.

Paul's going to say, I'm going to choose my language so that it will be plain to people where my burden is. I think Paul, when he looked at Rome, was way, way, way more concerned that Christians be humbly self-denying trusters of Jesus in their persecution than that they got their rights, which of course leads us to next time. What if loving people in your brokenness and loneliness and humility and trust, what if loving people means you should stand up for them when they're being hurt? Life is complicated, isn't it? Well, that's where we'll go next time.

But let me send you out, let me send you out into this weekend with just this thought and this exhortation. Bethlehem, let's humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and under our civic authorities. Let's give thanks.

Let tomorrow and the next day be a time of thanks for our civic authority. We are an unbelievably privileged people. Christians, renew your vows not to accumulate in this prosperous, protected time.

Renew your vows rather, I'm going to work, to earn, to give and give and give. I want to be a lover, not a rich man. Let's use our season of liberty to spread the gospel.

Father, I am so thankful for your providence called America. I do not become cynical, Lord. I live off the bounty of this land and off of its 1,000 ordinances that by and large protect me and this environment and this social structure so that it works in which millions prosper.

And if they are willing, bless the world through their prosperity. Oh God, I pray that Christians would be manifestly citizens of another kingdom by the way we use the benefits of America. We can't run away from them.

They're here. We all benefit from them whether we're driving a car or air conditioning our home or having a job or calling 9-1-1. We are such beneficiaries.

I simply plead with you, Father, that Christians would take all this bounty, live their simple wartime lives and give strategically and intelligently and lovingly and sacrificially to the causes of justice, of truth, of Christ-exalting joy around the world. In his name I pray. Amen.

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