

## **Introduction**

The letter of James confronts us with an important admonition. "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. . . . Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"

We have certainly seen the relevance of this instruction in the last month. Schedules and plans have been blown to smithereens. These are inconvenient and unprecedented times for everyone. They are exasperating to be sure and even frightening on some levels. I can hardly imagine a person on the planet that has not been affected by the current set of circumstances.

Government officials themselves are walking in the midst of uncharted territory. They are having to make judgments concerning matters no one would have imagined only a few months ago. They are relying on advisors considered by many across the globe to be medical experts. Meanwhile, the advice of these experts is challenged by others whose ideas and philosophies run in a different direction and who seem quite credible. We may struggle, wondering who to believe. But at the end of the day, government leaders have decided to whom they are going to listen and which advice they are going to follow.

Inevitably, politics cannot be separated from the thinking of either the "experts" or the authorities. In the midst of these circumstances, decisions are being made; orders have been issued; and plans are being formulated. Many of these plans, orders, and decisions therefore will inevitably meet with questioning. We may question them ourselves from the standpoint of common sense or strategic political motivation or even from the standpoint of legality or constitutionality. In these days some are convinced that sinister motives are at work, that subversive movements are afoot to take away individual freedoms, perhaps even to promote a one-world government. There can be no doubt that elitists support causes which are aimed at control, and wealthy individuals may champion those causes by throwing big money behind them. There can also be no doubt that politics always plays a major role in actions taken by power-wielding civil authorities.

The present set of circumstances begs a life-impacting question for followers of Jesus. How should we live in the midst of such days with reference to governing authorities? What do the scriptures say about a Christian's duty to the governing authorities? Do suspicions concerning motives and methods and expertise affect how we are to behave? In fact, the word of God is not silent on such matters. It is straightforward, and it is direct. And its instruction is repeated. We are going to turn to several texts of scripture this morning, starting with Romans 13:1-7.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

I have read posts on facebook and I have received text messages and heard questions from various individuals in the last few weeks. Some of you are fearful. Some of you are angry. Some of you are concerned about government overreach. You are concerned that steps being taken to stem off this virus are causing greater damage to the economy than can be measured by the damage of the virus itself. You feel as if leaders in authority have been excessively intrusive in these days. Some feel government has overstepped its bounds. You believe it is unconscionable that authorities have ordered that churches cannot meet in groups of more than 9 at-a-time while the slaughter of unborn babies continues unabated. Some of you have criticized the wisdom of actions being taken by persons in authority. Some of you believe that sinister powers are vying for greater control over this nation and your own lives in particular.

I want you to know that I also feel these same concerns. I cannot dispute the possibility that certain unwanted developments may be on the horizon. I along with you have grown accustomed to the freedoms and benefits afforded by having lived in what was at one time, perhaps, the greatest secular nation ever, with the greatest freedoms ever. My sorrow soars for the fact that morality in America is in steep decline. Sadly, I see our freedoms sinking with it. I bemoan the political shift that is in motion. It does not make me happy. Such a recognition disturbs my soul. I don't like it. I do not expect you do either.

It is for such a time as this that we need the clear and careful instruction of God's word. It is for such a time as this that we need to focus on what the

Lord desires from us. As we focus on him and his instruction, we can experience peace and assurance and have a correct sense of our responsibility in these tumultuous times. We begin with Romans 13:1-7.

## **I. Christian Responsibility to Governing Authority from Romans 13**

Romans is the epic theological work in the New Testament. Paul explores the depth and riches of God's grace and wisdom in the gospel. He then turns in chapter 12 to unfold the life-impacting difference this grace should make in terms of practical living for those who believe. He begins with an overall appeal that in view of God's mercy, Christ's followers should present themselves as living sacrifices, worshiping God by discerning and living out his will. One of the aspects of such living is relating properly to civil authority. It is what he addresses in the beginning of Romans 13. Here we have the who, what, to whom, and why of Christian responsibility to those who are seated in the position of governmental authority.

A. We start with WHO. Who is Paul addressing? He is quite pointed. He addresses "every person." It is striking because Paul could have omitted this designation and we would have understood it. But including the words, "every person," makes emphatic that NO ONE should see themselves as excluded from the exhortation he is about to give.

We need these kinds of reminders, don't we? It is natural for each of us when looking at ourselves especially in light of something we do not really want to do to think that we are the exception. But Paul will not let us do that here. There is no wiggle-room. This instruction applies to EVERY PERSON. You may be wealthy and think that your wealth qualifies for an exception. It does not. You may be an elder in the church or a pastor in the church and think, well that is for everybody else, not me. You may be really smart and understand the ins and outs of economics and medicine and politics. You may be able to explain why certain policy directions are terrible ideas, but that does not excuse you from the responsibility Paul sets forth here. But the main reason Paul specifies "every person" is to let Christians know this means us, too. We serve the king of kings. Jesus is our Lord. His kingdom is not of this world. We subject ourselves to him, so that means we are the exception, right? "Wrong," says Paul. Everyone includes Christians. It is the same with us as it was with him. Jesus himself

was not the exception when the temple tax collectors came calling. He made it abundantly clear that he WAS UNDER NO OBLIGATION to pay the tax. He was the son of the one whose temple it was. But he paid it anyway so as not to cause offense.

I remember as a teenager one of my first trips to the DMV back in South Carolina. I was registering a car or something. I took a number and waited forever. Finally my number was called and I went to the desk. I did not know what I was doing. I had not done this before. Yet I was treated like I should have known it all already. I was not special. I was treated just like everyone else. And I did not like it. There was a part of me that began forming a dislike for that place. The experience exposed the sin of pride in my heart.

I needed that kind of lesson. We all do. Because our flesh tells us all that we are the exception. We are the one that does not have to. But it is not so. There are some things from which nobody is exempt. Paul's exhortation here is one of them.

B. From the "who" we move to the "what." What is Paul's exhortation for every person? Let every person "be subject." He repeats the admonition in verse 5. We have it not once but twice. The repetition produces an unmistakable emphasis. It reiterates that the command is highly significant and inescapable. Every one MUST be in subjection. To be subject is to come under the authority of another. It is to behave with honor and respect and acceptance to the leading of another.

I am sure that you can understand the need for emphasis and repetition. Resistance is bound up in the sinner's heart. As babies develop into toddlers and toddlers into preschoolers and preschoolers into children and children into youths, and youths into adults, a spirit of independence is apparent at every stage. Human beings bristle against authority. One of the main reasons people disobey is that we simply do not want to be told what to do by someone else.

We ultimately must be submissive to God. But he commands submission on multiple levels of human relationship. Children are to be in subjection to

their parents. Wives are to be in subjection to their husbands. Slaves are to be in subjection to their masters. Christian brothers and sisters are to submit to one another. Members of Christ's church are to obey and submit to their spiritual leaders who exercise oversight. Authority and submission are deeply biblical themes.

The idea of being subject reflects more than merely an action. It reflects an attitude as well. It is a respectful posture, a bent towards acceptance and compliance. It is applied to the acts of paying taxes and revenue and behaving with reverence and honor.

C. To whom is every one to be subject? In verse one, Paul directs the subjection of every person to the "governing authorities." In verse 3, he calls them "rulers." These are people who have positions of jurisdictional authority through civil structures.

Paul points out two key aspects of these individuals.

1. First, their authority comes from God. He cannot be saying that everything they do is right and good. The historical context is the Roman government, namely the Emperor Nero, a man who stands out among even the Romans for his immorality and brutality. But Paul is saying that the governments and their rulers that are in place are under the sovereignty of God. God is the one who raises rulers up and puts them down. He has determined the boundaries and times of governmental authorities. As a result, to fail to be subject to these authorities is to resist what God himself has appointed. And there will be a payment for doing so.

2. Second, governmental rulers are servants of God. Paul affirms this designation twice—once in verse 4 and again in verse 5. They serve God in that they exert an influence for some semblance of justice and order in society. They promote good behavior and punish wickedness. God is operating through secular governments to punish evil doers and to commend those who do good. They have the power of encouraging good conduct, but they also bear the sword. Government authorities are God's tool to punish those who do evil.

Strikingly, I hear contemporary voices assert that this text requires that they resist government authorities because their allegiance is to the United States Constitution. I am sympathetic to many ways in which the U.S. Constitution has been re-written, misinterpreted, and effectually changed. And yet these individuals are attempting to sidestep Paul's intent here. Documents do not bear the sword; people do. Constitutions do not interpret themselves; judges do. We may completely disagree with governors and judges, but we cannot get away from the fact that PEOPLE are the governing authorities to which Paul points us here in Romans 13. Paul's intent here was not to try to create a loophole or mean the opposite of what he was saying. His intent is that every person be in subjection to people who govern.

## **II. Christian Responsibility from Other NT texts.**

Romans 13 is not the only text which deals with this matter.

### **A. Titus 3.**

Paul instructs Titus what to teach the Christians in the new churches in Crete. Chapter 3 and verse 1 says, "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy to all people." Notice the things that are stressed here together in a grouping—submission, obedience, goodness, speaking no evil, not quarrelsome, gentle, and courteous." Let that sink in.

### **B. 1 Peter**

Peter speaks in the same way. Turn to 1 Peter 2. Verses 13-17.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or as to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

### **C. Summary.**

The responsibility of Christian citizens seems clear. We have not one or even two, but three texts now, each of which underscores submission to

authority but also an attitude of respect and honor and a disposition of peace—not speaking evil, not being quarrelsome, being courteous, and being gentle. The reputation of Jesus is at stake. The demeanor called for is humility. Societies appear to have been accusing Christians as insurrectionists, disturbers of the peace. Only their humble, respectful, and submissive behavior would silence the whisperers.

God abhors pride but is gracious toward the humble. It is striking that 1 Peter is addressing how believers are to live in this world for the glory of God. Over and over he stresses subjection. He tells God's people to be subject to every human institution. He points first to government and then to servanthood. Peter directs servants to be subject to their masters with respect, and not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust because it is a gracious thing in the sight of God. Then he moves to the institution of marriage: "Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands." Then, "Likewise husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman." Then this: "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a HUMBLE mind."

### The Example of Jesus

And in the middle of all this talk of humility and subjection, Peter points to the preeminent example of self-sacrificing humility and subjection—Jesus Christ! Jesus! Yes. He shows servants and wives and husbands and everyone how to live honorably, but at the head of the list he speaks to Christians as citizens of secular societies, and he says, "Be subject." And the example is Jesus.

"Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return ; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins on the tree, that we might die to sin but live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." Never was there a greater miscarriage of justice than when Jesus died on the tree. The just died for the unjust in order that he might bring us to God, that we might be healed of the soul-destroying virus of sin and the defiance characterized by it. The Bible assures you today that if you will repent of

your sin and trust in Christ the crucified and risen Savior, you will be saved. You will be reconciled. You will have a place in his eternal kingdom. And it is because he did not demand his rights but relinquished them. And trusting in him, you are to take up a cross and live like he did.

Jesus submitted to the injustice of the earthly authorities, silently. In him the Father was well-pleased. And he raised him from the dead and seated him on high. Never did a person relinquish their rights so much as Jesus did. The demeanor Christians are called to display in the public square is the demeanor Jesus put on display when he died and rose in the place of sinners. When I hear "Christians" crying out defiantly for their rights, I consider the work of Jesus and say, something is wrong here. When my own flesh experiences the impulse to be defiant, I have to check it and remind myself whose reputation is at stake and what Jesus did for me. The call of Christ is for us not to demand our rights but relinquish them if necessary to adorn the gospel of Christ.

### **III. Christian Responsibility to Our Governing Authority**

Now let's apply the instruction of these texts to our situation today as citizens of the United States of America.

1. First, our call to be subject requires that we show respect. There is never a time for us to be disrespectful, speaking evil of those in authority. How do you honor someone who behaves disrespectfully? You honor them as a human being. And you honor them knowing that it is only the goodness of God that makes you different. God saves not because of goodness in us but in spite of our badness. He saves by his mercy. Remember that. Be humbled by the fact that you are what you are by the grace and mercy of God.

2. Second, our call to be subject requires that as a GENERAL course we will obey what governing authorities tell us to do. A posture of submission will USUALLY do what the governing authorities demand. I do not say, "ALWAYS," because a posture of submission will NOT ALWAYS obey the governing authorities. There WILL BE TIMES when Christians must respectfully refuse to obey them. Romans 13 does NOT teach that Christians must always obey the governing authorities no matter what.

Paul is explicit in this chapter that governments operate UNDER the sovereign rule of God. They are accountable to him. They are his servants. Any allegiance we give to government is because we give total allegiance to God. He has established governments to carry out some of his earthly purposes. Thank God for them and pray for them. In a general sense be ready to obey them. However, when they require of you what stands in opposition to what God has commanded, to obey them is to disobey God. When the two are in conflict, obey God. This was the action of the disciples in Acts 4 and 5, who were told to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. They were set between listening to the council and obeying God. They asserted that they must obey God rather than men. The same is true for you and me.

The GCC elders believe that in reverting to livestreams, letters, calls, Cds, and DVDs, and virtual meetings during this time, we are obeying God and being subject to the government. We also think it is wise to protect our flock from the pestilence. It is love for God and neighbor and respect to governing authority that drives our determination to operate this way for a brief period of time. If orders from our government ever require us to violate scripture, we will aggressively but humbly call it out and will obey God rather than men. We will follow in the path of Daniel. We will follow the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

3. Our relationship to the governing authorities in a constitutional republic means that in order to honor God we must take an active role. Being subject does not mean being silent. We bear responsibility before God for our role in a society that murders the unborn and promotes acceptance of what is abominable to God. We must not withdraw. We must speak. We speak with our vote. We speak by contacting representatives, governors, presidents. We speak by writing emails and letters. We speak by holding signs and peacefully marching while obeying the law.

4. Our relationship to the governing authorities needs to go hand-in-hand with a proper focus upon kingdom priorities. We should speak into the governing process and involve ourselves responsibly, but we must also remember that this is not our home. And the United States of America is not our king—not the constitution, not the President, not the Supreme Court.

JESUS is our king. And his primary directive to us is to proclaim the gospel and make disciples. Peter's directive to be subject to the civil authorities came under the broad heading of how to live as sojourners and exiles. And our first and abiding concern must not be saving a nation from itself, but seeing individuals saved from hell and brought into a relationship of reconciliation with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus made a powerful and instructive statement to Pilate just before he was handed over to be crucified. He said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world." Brothers and sisters, that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world means that the kingdom to which we belong is not of this world. Our priorities must not be of this world either. Being good citizens is one thing. Being consumed with preserving American liberties is another. Our first calling is to take up a cross and follow Jesus. Heaven is not a constitutional republic. It is ruled by a glorious and gracious king who is Lord of heaven and earth. His central commission is not to make nations or involve our selves in insurrections but to make disciples. We must remember this.

## **Conclusion**

5. There is one last thing we need to remember and bear in mind with reference to governing authorities and our subjection to them. God's sovereignty over them and his sovereignty over all things provides the Christian the assurance that in it all God is at work for good to his people. Romans 8:28 assures us that God causes all things to work together for good to those who are the called according to his purpose. All things includes viruses. It includes the uprising of sinister-minded elitists. It includes governor's orders. It includes a nation and a world where people have been shut down. It includes orders based on bad intelligence. "All things" includes everything.

Not too long ago I spent an entire sermon looking at the life of Joseph. Consider the sinister motives at work in his situation. A group of hateful brothers sold him into slavery. An evil woman falsely accused him of attempted rape. He went to prison where he spent years. But God!! Joseph flourished under whatever authority he was, and God raised him up

to be second to Pharaoh and to save his family from dying of hunger. His humble spirit was evident to the end when he said to his brothers, "What you meant for evil God meant for good." God is using all things this way for good for his people and for his glory. If you are his you can rest easy on this assurance! And it should affect the way you behave in relation to those in governing authority.