



**Lead In** Welcome to the church at Bethel, where we gather because of the **gospel**: Jesus in our place! Not have to, worship is a get to.

To those watching online and our guests here in person—let our round of **applause** be a big welcome to you.

Today we continue a series called suitcase: hot topics that you want God’s Word to impact. We all have **suitcases** that Yahweh wants you to carry on the journey, and we all have **baggage** that we need to leave behind. *Part of the Christ-life is knowing what to carry and what to leave behind.* So today, by your request, we are **Unpacking Christ and Politics**.

Shadi Hamid, an expert at the Center for Middle East Policy, recently concluded, “**American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it’s just that what was once a religious belief has not been channeled into political belief.**”

“**Conservatives** believe that they are faithful to the American idea and that liberals are betraying it—but **liberals** believe, with equal certitude, that they are faithful to the American idea and that conservatives are betraying it.”

“This is what religion without religion looks like.”

Unbeknownst to our culture, politics has become our religion. In this climate, where do Christ-followers fit? Thankfully the Bible is not silent and gives us a framework for living as Christ in a world of political idolatry. Meet me in Romans 13:1-7.

### **Unpacking Christ and Politics (Romans 13:1-7)**

The only direct discourse of Jesus concerning secular government is the famous passage where the Messiah responded to the challenge of taxes by proclamation, “**Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.**” The Apostle Paul further expands submission and prayer for authorities in Romans 13, Tim. and Titus and also 1 Peter. We begin today’s message with worldly positions toward the state, and then we examine Christian postures towards government.

**Sinful positions** **From God and by God**. These prepositions give me great hope and are the genesis of the Christian worldview. Everything and everyone owes its existence from Yahweh and by Yahweh.

**The sinful position of fear or pride**. In the Screwtape Letters (WW2), the demons affirm that “**tortured fear and stupid confidence are both desirable states of mind.**”

Remember that God has not given you a spirit of fear. An equally wicked position is prideful arrogance. Psalms 73 describes the wicked person as having **pride as their necklace**. Put on the robes of Christ, not the coat of fear or the necklace of pride.

**Sinful position #2, opposition**. Every passage in the NT that draws the church's attention to the government mentions a submissive posture. Some would say, “No one can tell me what to do; For freedom, Christ has set me free (Gal. 5:1)!” Remember that Galatians 2:20 always precedes 5:1. **I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

Freedom in Christ is not autonomy, to do what you want. Its freedom to do what **HE wants**. If your default position is **opposition**, you are not in the will of the Savior.

**The sinful position #3**, thinking that government is savior/the world is ending. Christians can never put their eternal hopes in any man or manufactured institution. We must reject the idea that any party will save our world or destroy it. **Your reaction to any given election is a visible thermometer of your hope in politics.** Redemption is not found in an elephant or a donkey, but the Lamb of God.

**This is the baggage (out) of politics**. Now let's look at the luggage (that which Jesus wants in your life)

**A Christ-centered Posture (13:1)** If the **worldly** posture is opposition, the **Christ-centered** posture is submission. If you find this command difficult, think of the church in Rome, under the rule of **Nero**—although extreme persecution had not yet come. Even more remarkable, at this time, there were no Christian authorities in the world—local, regional, or global. Romans does not say to submit to Christian leaders but to secular authorities.

We submit because there is no authority except **from** God. “**It seems to me that the Apostle intended by this word to take away the frivolous curiosity of men, who are won't often to inquire by what right (I didn't vote) they who rule have obtained authority**” (Calvin). Thus, the default (neutral-parked status) Christian posture is one of

submission and to **resist** authority is to **resist** God himself and bring **judgment** upon your soul!

Not only because of God's **command** do we submit, but we also submit because of **conscience**. In essence, you keep a clear conscience by submitting yourself to the authorities. Therefore, anyone who says they submit to Christ and yet acts with **disrespect** presents a **contradiction**. This person is not living with a clean or clear conscience. Repent and be cleansed today.

**What about an evil government?** Is the command to submit to government **universal**? Yes! Is the command to submit to higher authorities **absolute**? No! However, there are **very few exceptions**. We are to **submit right up until the point that obedience to the state would equal disobedience to Christ.**

If the state authorities command what God forbids, or if the government forbids what God commands( not what I think, but what is evident in the Word), then our plain duty to our Savior is to resist and disobey that we might submit and obey our Lord. **Not about rights, but about worship.**

The world will hear our NO's of moral resistance more clearly if they see our YES's of submission. If the **worldly** posture is opposition, the **Christ-centered** posture is submission.

**A Christ-centered Practice (13:4)** Christian attitude always leads to Christian practice. Simply, do **good** and not **wrong**. Jesus said it this way, **"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"** (Matthew 5:16). I think that the church should love their city and community more than any other entity. Oh, that our church would be a gathering where the world says, **"I wish that Bethel would be in our community."**

**Social media rants will not change the world- but our Savior will.** You have a voice; make sure you use it for Jesus. Those who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good do good so that the world might see light:

Regardless of who is in power because we know **Who** is in control.

**A Christ-centered Payment(13:4):** **Every Christian must have** a third Christ-centered posture: pay what is due. You must pay your taxes, your tolls, respect, and honor. The modern equivalent is to pay your speeding fines, hunting license, and other regulatory fees. *I don't know who struggled with paying taxes at the church in Rome, but there was a least one person, either resistant or delinquent.*

We are not to **tolerate** the state as if it is a **necessary evil**. We have the opportunity (yes even in taxes) to encourage our authorities to fulfill their God-appointed role, and in so doing, **we actively participate in kingdom work**.

**A Christ-centered Passport** Christian, never forget that you have a higher calling. **Why** do we submit? Because God is sovereignly in control. **Why** do we practice good? Because by God, we live and move. **Why** do we pay? Because we owe nothing in Christ, we should owe no man anything. But the **chief end** of any government is to make its state or nation as good as possible. In essence, the chief end of the state is to attempt to make earth like heaven (**more perfect union**). And to this end, we cannot agree.

For the one who has faith in Christ, this will never be heaven. Earth is tainted with sin and stained with irreconcilable brokenness. Our broken world is a reminder not to get too attached because there is something better!

I love to travel. I like going to other states and nations. I love tasting the foods of different cultures, seeing the different dress, hearing multiple languages, and touching different geography. But as often as I can travel, it's nice to be home. Usually, upon arriving in the United States, the immigration officer will examine my passport and reply, **welcome home**. Christian, we will never experience that on earth. We must live by the narrow way.

In Christ, we can't sing this song with all of our heart, soul, and strength:

*This land is your land, and this land is my land  
From California to the New York island  
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me (Woodie Guthrie)*

In Christ, we sing a better song:

**This world is not my home; I'm just passing through  
my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue  
the angels beckon me from Heaven's open door  
and I can't feel at home in this world anymore**

If you are living to make heaven your home, you will never find it. In Christ, you have an eternal passport.

**So What?** C.S. Lewis writing about Satan's desire for you, said this, "Let him (Christian) begin by treating Patriotism or Pacifism as a **part** of his religion." Then let him regard it as the **most important** part.

This one thing I know, only a transformed church, will transform our world.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. <sup>2</sup>  
Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

This is how we participate in the Kingdom while we live under earthly authority.

## Exegetical Notes

The only direct discourse of Jesus concerning secular government was his teaching and answer to the challenge of taxes in Matthew 22:15-22. Paul addresses submission to and prayer for secular authorities in Romans 13:1-7 (Rome), 1 Timothy 2:2 (Ephesus), and Titus 3:1-3 (Crete). Each passage contains clear themes for the Christian: submission, do good and pay what is owed.

Because sin is a reality in human culture, Paul knew that it would be to the advantage of Christians to be sheltered by the civil authorities from the effects of sin in society—especially in light of the likelihood of the escalation of sin as the present age draws to a close. Therefore, what seems contradictory at first—for believers in Christ to submit themselves to pagan “lords”—is really for the believers’ own good (Holman New Testament Commentary)

Four main models of church-state relationships throughout history:

1. Erastianism- the state controls the church
2. Theocracy- the church controls the state
3. Constantinianism- the compromise in which the state favors the church, and the church accommodates the state to retain the favor
4. Partnership- the church and state recognize and encourage each other’s distinct God-given responsibilities in a spirit of constructive collaboration (Stott, 339).

**Rom 13:1** Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God.

### Governing authorities

Nero was emperor at this time, but he had not yet begun persecuting Christians or repressing other groups; he was still under the benevolent influences of Seneca and Burrus, rather than the reprobate Tigellinus. Nero was always popular in Greece, from which Paul was writing (IVP).

Although some Palestinian Jews already advocated the revolt against Rome that would take place in little more than a decade, other Palestinian Jews reportedly swore to nonresistance, believing that God had ordained all civil authorities (in the Old Testament, cf. Is 45:1; Jer 25:9; Dan 4:32). Jews in Rome certainly upheld this position and would have been embarrassed by any other. Judaism generally believed in submission (which is a matter of nonresistance or nonviolence, not

always of obedience) unless it involved a conflict with obeying God's law. The Old Testament clearly taught God's sovereignty over earthly rulers (Prov 16:10; 21:1).

He calls them the higher powers, (400) not the supreme, who possess the chief authority but such as excel other men. Magistrates are then thus called with regard to their subjects and not as compared with each other. And it seems true to me, that the Apostle intended by this word to take away the frivolous curiosity of men, who are wont often to inquire by what right they who rule have obtained their authority; but it ought to be enough for us, that they do rule; for they have not ascended by their own power into this high station, but have been placed there by the Lord's hand. And by mentioning every soul, he removes every exception, lest anyone should claim immunity from the common duty of obedience (John Calvin)

The position of Jews within the Roman Empire was regulated by a succession of imperial edicts. Indeed, as a subject nation within the empire, they enjoyed quite exceptional privileges (Bruce, 218)

Christianity started out with a most serious handicap in the eyes of Roman Law, for the sufficient reason that its founder had been convicted and executed on a charge of sedition by the sentence of a Roman judge (Bruce, 219).

Alliance to God does not negate responsibility to secular authority. In Paul's day, all those serving as public officials probably were nonbelievers. That is to make no difference for the Christian because there is no authority apart from that which God has established. He alone is the sole source of authority, and it has pleased him to delegate authority to those in charge of the public well-being. Paul clearly stated that "the authorities that exist have been established by God." When Pilate told Jesus that he had the power to set free or to crucify, he was reminded that he would have no power at all if it had not been given to him from above (John 19:11). It is important to remember that government is God's way of maintaining the public good and directing the affairs of the state (NAC).

### **Submit**

What Paul writes is specifically remarkable when we recall that at that time, there were no Christian authorities (global, regional, or local) (Stott, 339).

When it came to presenting oneself as a living sacrifice to God, Paul "urged" the Christians to do so (Rom. 12:1). But when it came to submitting oneself to the governing authorities of the land, urging was replaced by commanding: **Everyone must submit**

**himself** (*hupotasso*; present passive imperative) **to the governing authorities**. Why the imperative, the command? Because, in principle (though not always in specifics), to submit to the civil authority is to submit to God (HNTC)

We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. If the state commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God (Stott, 342).

### **Authority**

The statement in this command, which unlocks its meaning and which gives Christians ground to accept it and apply it, is this: There is no authority except that which God has established. This is a statement of the overarching sovereignty and rule of God in the affairs of this world. If God has appointed every civil ruler, every governing authority, then why should any Christian fear submit to that which God has appointed? (HNTC)

### **Instituted**

What Paul wanted the believers in Rome to understand was that, in the Roman Empire (or any other), “No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another” (Ps. 75:6–7). And even after he is in office, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Prov. 21:1). Therefore, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (those Roman emperors spanning the lifetime of the Roman church up until Paul’s writing) had ascended to power with God’s permission—actually, by his direction (**have been established by God**)—as have the rulers of today (HNTC)

<sup>2</sup> So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves.

It follows that the one who resists authority is resisting what God has ordained. Those who act in this manner will bring judgment upon themselves. Rebels against authority malign the Giver of authority. It is a dangerous thing to set oneself in opposition to a divinely ordered process. Those who rule pose no threat to those whose lives are marked with good deeds. It is the one who does evil who fears authority. Returning to the diatribe style, Paul asked his readers whether they would like to be free from fear of the one in authority. The answer was simple: practice doing what is right. This brings the approval of secular society (cf. 1 Pet 3:13) (NAC).

Obviously, this does not happen in every instance. The government sometimes oversteps its rightful domain. When this happens, the believer will find it impossible to obey the ruler. Two clear examples of civil disobedience are found in Acts. When Peter and John were told by the Sanhedrin not to preach in the name of Jesus, they replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:19). Upon being released, they resumed their work and consequently were taken into custody. To the charge of the Sanhedrin that they had filled Jerusalem with their teaching, they replied, “We must obey God rather than man!” (Acts 5:29). The believer’s ultimate allegiance is to God. Wherever the demands of secular society clearly violate this higher allegiance, the Christian will act outside the law. This, of course, must not be done in a cavalier fashion (NAC).

## Resist

The question of civil disobedience is not an easy one, nor a new one (see “Deeper Discoveries”). When the apostle's Peter and John were told by Jewish leaders “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus ... Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God... We must obey God rather than men’ ” (Acts 4:18–19; 5:29). There obviously comes a time when governing authorities are to be “resisted” (the question of “How?” is another worthy discussion) through disobedience to their injunctions. The key to discerning when that time has come is found in Paul’s words, **what God has instituted**. When rulers put themselves in place of God by legislating moral or spiritual positions (all acts have moral and spiritual roots) which are contrary to the revealed positions of God, resistance is warranted.

Generally speaking, the church historically has differentiated between governing authorities forcing versus allowing a moral or spiritual condition contrary to the laws of God. If the position is commanded (such as Herod’s killing of male children two years old and younger, or Hitler’s decree that Jews and other minorities were to be eliminated, or the prohibition against religious activities on public property), then the injunction is to be resisted in all possible ways. If the position is allowed but not commanded (such as modern laws allowing abortion), then resistance is to be voiced by the church in an attempt to have immoral standards changed, to restore God’s standards to society.

Concerning Paul’s words here, F. F. Bruce says, “It is plain from the immediate context, as from the general context of the apostolic writings, that the state can rightly command obedience only within the limits of the purposes for which it has been divinely instituted—in particular, the state not only may but must be resisted when it demands the allegiance due to God alone” (Bruce, pp. 223–224). He proceeds to cite the words of Sir T. M. Taylor (*The Heritage of the Reformation*, 1961), who says, “The obedience which the Christian man owes to the State is never absolute but, at the most,

partial and contingent. It follows that the Christian always lives in a tension between two competing claims; that in certain circumstances, disobedience to the command of the State may be not only a right but also a duty. This has been classical doctrine ever since the apostles declared that they ought to obey God rather than men” (cited by Bruce, p. 224). The moral and spiritual standards that God **has instituted** are to be upheld whenever the positions of **authority** come in conflict with them.

### **Civil disobedience?**

“We may observe that the apostle here pays no regard to the question of the duty of Christians in revolutionary movements. His precepts regard an *established power*, be it what it may. *It*, in all matters lawful, *we are bound to obey*. But even the parental power does not extend to things unlawful. If the civil power commands us to violate the law of God, we must obey God before man. If it commands us to disobey the common laws of humanity or the sacred institutions of our country, our obedience is due to the higher and more general law rather than the lower and particular. These distinctions must be drawn by the wisdom granted to Christians in the varying circumstances of human affairs: they are all only subordinate portions of the great duty of *obedience to LAW*. To obtain, by lawful means, the removal or alteration of an unjust or unreasonable law is another part of this duty: for all powers among men must be in accord with the highest power, the moral sense. But even where the law is hard and unreasonable, not *disobedience*, but *legitimate protest*, is the duty of the Christian.” (Alford)

But Christians will voice their ‘No’ to Caesar’s unauthorized demands more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say ‘Yes’ to his authorized demands (Bruce, 222).

<sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval.

Here Paul offers standard ancient moral exhortation. The Roman state did many evil things; even its court system was based on social class. But the Romans generally advocated justice and toleration, and at this point, the Christians have nothing to fear from them. Paul thus does not need to qualify the general principle he is articulating at this time. “The sword” refers to the standard method of execution in this period (beheading); in earlier times, the ax had been used. Swords were carried in front of Roman officials to indicate their authority over life and death (IVP)

And he adds, Wilt not thou then fear the power? Do good. By this he intimates, that there is no reason why we should dislike the magistrate if indeed we are good; nay, that it is an implied proof of an evil conscience, and of one that is devising some mischief when anyone wishes to shake off or to remove from himself this yoke. But he speaks

here of the true, and, as it were, of the native duty of the magistrate, from which however they who hold power often degenerate; yet the obedience due to princes ought to be rendered to them. For since a wicked prince is the Lord's scourge to punish the sins of the people, let us remember that it happens through our fault that this excellent blessing of God is turned into a curse.

<sup>4</sup> For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.

Three times Paul makes clear that the state has authority from God, now he affirms three times that it has a ministry from God (Stott, 343).

The ruler serves as an instrument of God for the benefit of society. We are reminded of Cyrus, the Persian emperor, whom God anointed to carry out his will (Isa 44:28; 45:1; cf. also Jer 25:9). It is the person who makes it a practice of disobeying who has reason to be afraid. The ruler serves as the agent of God for the punishment of the one who does wrong. The text says that "he does not bear the sword for nothing."

### **Sword**

The sword is a symbol of the power delegated to governing authorities to enforce acceptable social conduct. Here we have the biblical basis for the use of force by the government for the maintenance of law and order. The power to punish has been delegated by God to those who rule.<sup>68</sup> To disobey the laws of the land, except where they contravene the express will of God, is to violate the purpose of God himself.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.

### **Conscience**

Obedience to civil law is necessary not only for fear of punishment but also for the sake of conscience. As Phillips puts it, one should obey “not simply because it is the safest, but because it is the right thing to do.”

Paul’s last word in his explanation concerns motivation. While avoiding **punishment** is always a legitimate motivation for submitting to authority, there is a higher motivation for the Christian’s submission to **the authorities**—the motivation of a clear **conscience**. One of the verses cited above—Proverbs 24:21—illuminates Paul’s words: “Fear the Lord and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious.” For one to say that he or she fears God while acting with impudence toward governing authorities presents a contradiction that cannot stand in the face of **conscience**.

That is, in order to keep a clear **conscience**, the Christian must submit to governing authorities (Rom 13:1). Christians must pay their taxes, obey the speed limit, buy fishing and hunting licenses, wear their seat belts, and do a myriad of other things they would rather not do—and do them all in both the letter and spirit of the law. Conscience is not an infallible guide, as Paul said—“My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent” (1 Cor. 4:4)—but it is a place to start.

<sup>6</sup> And for this reason, you pay taxes, since the authorities are God’s servants, continually attending to these tasks. <sup>7</sup> Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.

## Taxes

Part of what it means to submit to the authorities is to pay taxes. Believers are to carry out this particular civil obligation because those who levy taxes are servants of God.<sup>71</sup> They devote their time and energies to governing. They are “God’s servants” in the sense that it is God who has granted them the authority with which they secure and maintain civil order. Believers are under obligation to those in authority in government (cf. Mark 12:16). They are to pay taxes where taxes are due and “import duties” (TLB) where such charges are appropriate. They are to respect and honor governing authorities, “not because they are powerful and influential *men*, but because they have been appointed by God.” The social benefits that come from a properly managed state place the Christian under obligation to abide by the accepted regulations. Undergirding all secular law and order is the authority of God delegated to those who rule. (NAC)

In consequence, Christians who recognize that the state's authority and ministry come from God will do more than tolerate it as if it were a necessary evil. They will encourage the state to fulfill its God-appointed role and, in so far as they have the opportunity, actively participate in its work (Stott, 347).

## Illustrations

There is a rightful zone of activity that belongs to the government, but it is not coextensive with the whole that is ruled by God. The government should never be confused with the authority behind all authorities. When governments go beyond merely tolerating sin and instead celebrate it, they hack away at the legs of their own thrones. And when governments seek to force Christians to betray their understanding of the lordship issue—namely that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not—the Christian must say with the apostles (and martyrs throughout history) that we must obey God rather than men ([Acts 5:29](#)). (Hunter Baker, 2005)

This land is your land, and this land is my land  
From California to the New York island  
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me (Woodie Guthrie)

This world is not my home; I'm just passing through  
my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue  
the angels beckon me from Heaven's open door  
and I can't feel at home in this world anymore  
  
O Lord, you know I have no friend like you  
If Heaven's not my home, then Lord, what will I do?  
the angels beckon me from Heaven's open door  
and I can't feel at home in this world anymore

American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once a *religious* belief has now been channeled into *political* belief. Political debates over what America is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations. This is what religion without religion looks like (Hamid, 2021)

- Conservatives believe that they are faithful to the American idea and that liberals are betraying it—but liberals believe, with equal certitude, that they are faithful to the American idea and that conservatives are betraying it.
- Though the United States wasn't founded as a Christian nation, Christianity was always intertwined with America's self-definition. Without it, Americans —

conservatives and liberals alike—no longer have a common culture upon which to fall back.

- Whereas religion sees the promised land as being above, in God’s kingdom, the utopian left sees it as being *ahead*, in the realization of a just society here on Earth.

“Tortured fear and stupid confidence are both desirable states of mind.” (Screwtape letters, #15).

“Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of a partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part.” (Screwtape letters)

### **NUMB**

- They found that content across all platforms continually moved towards more opinion, with 2000 being a critical year where cable news ratings began to rise. Instead of basic presentation of fact, broadcast news moved towards more conversation, opinion, and argument to match some of the content occurring on cable news. Chaffin, Charles R.. Numb (p. 22). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
- Actually, false stories were 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories, with true stories taking six times as long.
- They found that participants were drawn to the negative news far more than the positive news, even though they said that they preferred positive news.
-