

GOVERNMENT 101 FOR AMERICAN CHRISTIANS
ROMANS 13:1-7; 1 PETER 2:13-17

I am currently reading a book entitled, *Say Nothing*, a true story about the violent, bitter conflict in Northern Ireland in the last half of the twentieth century. It was a clash between Catholics and Protestants, though it was primarily a *political* struggle rather than religious. At issue was the Catholic minority's perception that they were being oppressed and discriminated against by the ruling authorities in Northern Ireland, which included the British government, the police, and local Protestant leaders.

The conflict was so fierce and lasted so long that an entire generation grew up believing it was their responsibility, indeed their duty, to be suspicious and defiant of authority. The author describes how children would sit on their fathers' laps in the evenings and be regaled with mesmerizing tales of loved ones who bombed police stations or started riots or terrorized neighborhoods. Fathers spoke reverently about those who lost their lives or limbs for the Irish Republic.

Naturally, that early childhood indoctrination perpetuated the suspicion, resentment, and hatred for governing authorities. Government was never, ever to be trusted. Government was enemy #1.

It may not be as intense or extreme, but U.S. citizens have had a somewhat similar history (also with Britain) that causes many to be wary of government, especially government that is perceived to be intrusive, oppressive, or restrictive. Many are fond of quoting our founding fathers who, in giving a rationale for independence from Britain, wrote that when a government becomes overbearing and abuses its authority, citizens have the right, indeed the duty, "to throw off such Government."

This political conviction has been engrained into the consciences of many of us from an early age. We have been taught that self-autonomy and independence are our inherent rights, and we have been urged to protect those rights at whatever cost. Many feel they have a duty to protect those rights, even if it means resisting or defying government.

But is that a good thing? Is it right? What does God think about such an attitude or conviction? What is His view of government, and how does He want Christ-followers to relate to government?

Those are very important questions in any day and age, but they are especially consequential in our present day with all that is going on in our country. Of course, the only way to find out the answer to those questions is to go to Scripture to see what God says about this subject. Fortunately for us, God has quite a bit to say, and what He has to say is surprisingly straightforward.

The most comprehensive instruction about our relationship to government comes in the first part of Romans 13, where Paul says, *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. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ 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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*

If, after reading this passage, your American blood is starting to boil, I would encourage you take a deep breath and listen carefully as I provide you with a context for what Paul says

in this text. Paul, himself a writer of Scripture, possessed a worldview that was shaped by the other writers of Scripture. More importantly, he had the Holy Spirit's worldview when he wrote, since the Spirit gave him His words.

The centerpiece of that worldview is a sovereign God who not only created the world but manages the world. World history is not a random series of events and circumstances, nor is it a story about the survival of the fittest. History is the progressive unfolding of God's plan to reconcile the world to Himself through Jesus Christ. History is *God's* story. God is the Author of the story, and He and His Son are the main characters. So, the history of the world is not primarily about empires and nations and powerful political figures; it is not about monarchies or democracies or political ideologies. It is about a sovereign, hands-on Creator orchestrating events, circumstances, and people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to accomplish His purposes that will result in His pleasure and glory.

This is a biblical worldview, and the way it works itself out with respect to government is that God Himself establishes kings and kingdoms to accomplish His ultimate purposes. Whether they know Him or not; whether they recognize that He put them in their positions or not.

This week, as I was reading 2 Kings, I read about Sennacherib, the King of the most powerful empire in the world at that time, Assyria, who mustered his forces against Hezekiah, king of Judah, with the intent to destroy Jerusalem. And in the hearing of all the people of Jerusalem Sennacherib boasted about how he had conquered all of the countries in the known world, and he said to Hezekiah and the people of Judah, ³⁵ *Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD [Yahweh] deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"* (2 Kings 18:35).

And in response to Sennacherib's taunts and threats, the LORD delivered this word through the prophet Isaiah:

²² *Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed?*

*Against whom have you raised your voice
and lifted your eyes in pride?*

Against the Holy One of Israel!

²³ *By your messengers*

*you have heaped insults on the Lord.
And you have said,*

*"With my many chariots
I have ascended the heights of the mountains,
the utmost heights of Lebanon.
I have cut down its tallest cedars,
the choicest of its pines.
I have reached its remotest parts,
the finest of its forests.*

²⁴ *I have dug wells in foreign lands
and drunk the water there.*

*With the soles of my feet
I have dried up all the streams of Egypt."*

²⁵ *"Have you not heard?*

*Long ago I ordained it.
In days of old I planned it;
now I have brought it to pass,*

U.S. citizens. When this world is destroyed only two things will endure: the souls of people and the Word of God.

The final thing a biblical worldview that gives context for Paul's instructions about our relationship to government is the battle in this earth realm is spiritual. Paul said in Ephesians, *"our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* (6:12). The battle that is raging in this earth realm is between two spiritual kingdoms—the kingdom of darkness (Satan's realm) versus the kingdom of light (Jesus' realm), and the stakes in this battle are the souls of people who will either populate heaven or hell for all eternity.

It is important to remember this as we observe and evaluate the current events and issues in our world today that are causing so much distress and division. Many voices are telling us that the solutions to these problems are political—that if only we were to elect the right people, pass the right legislation, enact the right policies, or appoint the right judges to the Supreme Court, then our problems would be solved. That is *not* a biblical worldview. A biblical worldview says, "It's not a political problem; it's a spiritual problem, and if there is going to be true healing and resolution, we must deal with the spiritual issues."

That biblical worldview is the broad context for what Paul says about government in Romans 13. We are now going to begin looking at the text itself to learn God's view of government and God's expectations for how we, his children, relate to government. Look at **verse 1a**. ¹ *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.* (Say it with me again).

Please note that the verb in this statement is an imperative or a command. That means this is not a suggestion or a recommendation; it is a mandate from God. Therefore, it is non-negotiable, and it is not optional. If you are a child of God or a follower of Jesus, God commands you to submit to governing authorities. And none of us is exempt. He says, "Let every person be subject to governing authorities. He does not give an exemption to U.S. citizens. He does not make an exception for those who don't agree with or didn't vote for the governing authorities. Every Christ-follower has been commanded by God to be subject to the governing authorities.

So then, we need to be very clear about what it means to be subject to governing authorities. The word means "to submit". It means to submit to or to obey the orders or directives of someone, which presumes that we do what they tell us to do. We defer our will be their will. We follow their directives and obey their mandates.

Who are the governing authorities? The word means "rulers", and the context indicates that this is a reference to civic rulers or official government leaders, for later in the text he refers to these authorities as those to whom we pay taxes (13:6-7). In the first century Roman Empire, just like in the U.S., these authorities included federal, state, and local authorities. So, for an American citizen it would range from the President of the U.S. to the local police.

When Peter gave a similar command regarding our relationship to the governing authorities, he said, ¹³ *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by Him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good"* (2:13-14).

It is significant that the emperor at the time Peter wrote this letter was Nero, who was not only pagan, he was anti-Christian. He persecuted Christians terribly. Yet Peter makes it clear that we are to submit even to people like him. Which suggests that God's command to submit to governing authorities includes all authorities. Not just the ones who call

themselves Christians, not just the ones who align with our political leanings, not just the ones with whom we agree.

Paul tells us why in the last part of **verse 1**. ***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.***

Paul is explicit here. Not only does he say “authority” (which is a reference to government) is from God; he says *all* authority is from God. Literally, *“there is no authority except from God.”* That is an exact, precise translation of the Greek text. And it means exactly what it says. All authority that exists and has ever existed is from God.

But he gets even more specific in the next phrase. He says that those authorities that exist have been *instituted* by God. That word translated “instituted” means “to place” or “to cause to be.” It refers to a person *causing* something—not allowing or permitting something; but *causing* something. That means that Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Nero, Constantine, Hitler, Donald Trump, Kate Brown, and Stu Miller have all been put in their positions by God.

You say, “Wait, I don’t believe that! I *can’t* believe that! The God I know and believe in would never *put* someone like Hitler in a position of authority. That would make Him an accessory to evil. This is just absurd!”

Admittedly, this is a theological conundrum, and I am certainly not intelligent enough to adequately explain it (I’m not sure anyone is), but I can find dozens of Scriptural references in both the Old and New Testament that support it. Just yesterday I read in 2 Kings 24 about one of the final kings of Judah, Hezekiah’s great, great-grandson named Jehoiakim. Remember, these were God’s people, and Jehoiakim was an ancestor of King David whom God promised would have an everlasting kingdom. But listen to these words:

² The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against [Jehoiakim]. He sent them to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by His servants the prophets. ³ Surely these things happened to Judah according to the LORD’s command, in order to remove them from His presence... (25:2-3).

Here is what I want you to notice about this text: God was not passive in the destruction of Jehoiakim and Judah. He didn’t merely allow or permit it to happen. He caused it to happen. He *sent* these pagan raiders to destroy them; He gave the command to remove the inhabitants of Judah from His presence.

Why? Because it is His story. It’s all working out in a way that sets the stage for His Son to be born, ironically, from the lineage of the very people He destroyed (Judah). Ultimately and not surprisingly, God kept His promise to David. Jesus Christ, David’s heir, the King of kings, is now sitting on heaven’s throne. Which proves that history is, indeed, God’s story about reconciling the world to Himself through Christ, and that God specifically and strategically orchestrates circumstances, events, and people to accomplish His ultimate purposes.

We often cannot make sense of what we see going on from our perspective. We cannot see the forest for the trees, and therefore it can seem confusing and even contradictory to us. But God is sovereign, and God is the author of the story. It all makes perfect sense to Him and will result in His glory and pleasure.

So, if God places rulers in their positions of authority, and if God commands us to submit to them, what does God think if we resist governing authorities and do not submit to them? Paul tells us in **verse 2**. ***² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.***

This seems pretty straightforward, but let's make sure we understand exactly what Paul is saying. He uses the word "resist." That word means "to oppose someone, involving not only a psychological attitude but a corresponding behavior" (Louw, Nida). Sometimes it is translated, "to show a sour face toward," or "to have a mean heart toward," or "to turn one's back on." So, implicit in the word is a bad attitude—a hostile attitude. *Defiance* would be a good synonym for "resist" because it conveys the attitude that Paul intended.

Think about what Paul is saying here. When we have a defiant, resistant attitude toward government, we are essentially defying and resisting God. I know this is what Paul means because he says that those who have such an attitude will incur judgment, and that judgment comes from God. It has to be God's judgment, not judgment from human authorities.

Paul says, those who resist *will* incur judgment. Not *might* incur, not *could* incur. *Will* incur. If you have a bad attitude toward government will the government judge you? Possibly, but rarely. Most often the government does not even know that a person has a defiant, resistant attitude. But God knows. And that attitude is of such great concern to God that He *will* judge those who have a bad attitude toward those that He has put in their positions of authority.

I can hear the protests. Especially the protest, "Yeah but...there has to be a line somewhere, and where do you draw the line?" That is a valid question, and we are going to address that question next week, Lord willing. But before we do, I want to challenge you to do something. Let this verse sink in. Let what God thinks and feels about a person who is resistant to government affect you like it should—let it compel you to *fear* God.

Before you look for a loophole or before you look for a way to legitimize a bad attitude toward government, grasp the significance of verses 1 and 2. God tells us to submit to governing authorities because He put those authorities in their positions (He will go on in this passage to tell us why He did that), and then God says that if we defy or resist those authorities we are defying and resisting Him and will be judged by Him.

I plead with you, before we look, next time, at where we draw the line (the exceptions where we must obey God rather than men) ponder this for a few days. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you if you are in sync with Him in this matter of your attitude and relationship to government.

I started this message by talking about those who have been raised to be suspicious of government and to resist government. As U.S. citizens, we certainly have a right to do that. But is it okay for U.S. citizens who are also kingdom citizens to do that? Don't forget, when there is a clash between the values and principles and obligations of our U.S. citizenship and our heavenly citizenship, the values, principles and obligations of our heavenly citizenship *always* supersede those of our U.S. citizenship.

In other words, Jesus is the Ultimate Sovereign in our lives. And when He commands us to do something, we do it, even if we don't fully understand it. We do it because we trust the One who *does* understand—that He must have a reason that corresponds to His ultimate purposes. So, our obedience and submission to the Lord is the ultimate reason for our obedience and submission to governing authorities. Peter said as much in the passage I alluded to earlier. "***Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution***" (1 Pet. 2:13).

Government 101 for American Christians Romans 13:1-2

Main Idea: We are to submit to governing authorities because *God* put those authorities in place to deter bad conduct and execute justice

Introduction to Romans 13:1-5

A Biblical Worldview w/ Respect to Government
An absolutely sovereign God

A temporary world

A spiritual (not a political) battle

The Command to Submit to Governing Authorities (1a)
The meaning of “submit”

The ones to whom this applies

The governing authorities

The Reason for Submission (1b)
All authority is from God

Authorities have been instituted by God
The meaning of “instituted”

The theological conundrum

The Consequences of Resistance (2)
Resisting government means resisting God (2a)

Those who resist will incur God’s judgment (2b)