

Session 4

FINDING OUR POLITICAL WAY

Romans 13:1-7

Memory Verse

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

– ROMANS 13:1, CSB

Finding Our Political Way

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is sovereign over earthly rulers.

Religion and politics are two topics that conventional etiquette indicates are not polite conversation. So when the conversation turns to how these two topics relate to one another, it is not uncommon for everyone to get a little apprehensive. The Herodians and Pharisees knew that; that's why they asked Jesus about it. They were seeking to trap Jesus and, after all, nothing is more inflammatory than mixing politics and religion.

When the leaders asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus knew exactly why they were asking but, incredibly, decided to answer their impossible question anyway. Taking a coin, Jesus answered a question like He had done so many times before: by asking another question. "Whose image and inscription is this?" (Matt. 22:20) When the conspirators answered His question with the obvious response that it was Caesar's image and inscription, Jesus gave one of the most frequently quoted responses for dealing with civic entanglements. "Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:21)

When that phrase is lobbed about in discussions in contemporary culture, that last bit about giving God the things that are God's is usually left off. Unfortunately, that's the most important part because what Jesus had used to determine ownership was image. As Genesis 1:26-27 makes clear, that which bears the image of God is not merely minted coins, but humanity. From the beginning, God's ultimate authority has been declared over humanity. The manner in which that is expressed in the governing authorities has become increasingly complex. That complexity, however, is still made clear in the answer Jesus provided to those conspirators two millennia ago.

❓ What did Jesus' response indicate about His belief regarding the responsibilities of citizenship?

❓ How have you found to be the best way to enter into discussion about religion and politics while keeping the conversation civil and respectful? Why is that particularly important for a Christian?

❓ What are some markers that you would expect to see in a person's life that is a "good citizen"? Describe the last time you saw one of those markers lived out in front of you? How did it impact you?

In this week's session, Paul addressed the relationship the believers in Rome were to have with those in authority over them. Particularly because of the persecution the believers in Rome faced as a result of Rome's cult of the Emperor, the believers struggled to navigate how to live under a regime that seemed to deny everything they believed. Paul reminded the believers of the sovereignty of God over all things, including those who exercised worldly authority over them.

1. The Only Source of True Authority (Romans 13:1-2)

In the verses immediately preceding Romans 13:1-7, Paul wrote in concise, rapid-fire form to communicate a list of traits or marks that would be in the true Christian's life in an increasing capacity. In that list of evidences of transformation, Paul dealt with such heavy matters as how believers are to serve one another with zeal, how believers were to bless those that persecute them, and the importance of leaving revenge to the Lord. Abruptly, at the opening of chapter 13, Paul injected a prolonged section that addressed the solitary topic of how believers were to live in submission to governing authorities. The passage was so abrupt, in fact, that many scholars assert that it was added later by a redactor. However, given the political context within which the Roman believers existed, the application of the love of Christ warranted a word about how they might coexist under such tyranny.

To that end, Paul directed the believers to be subject to governing authorities on the basis that it is God who placed those authorities in their temporary positions of power. The wording was carefully chosen and carried a proportional significance. Specifically, Moo says, "Paul calls on believers to 'submit' to governing authorities rather than to 'obey' them.... To submit is to recognize one's subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have 'authority' over us."¹ The crucial difference in submission and obedience was elevated when Paul pointed, in the next clause, to the only One who was to be obeyed. There was to be no misunderstanding; the true authority rested with God's sovereign will.

Paul's insistence that no earthly ruler rules outside of God's appointment reflected long-held Jewish understanding, which was revealed frequently in the Old Testament. Most notably, perhaps, were the interactions between Daniel and the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar. According to Moo, "Paul's dependence on this tradition and his all-inclusive language ('there is no authority except') make clear that he is asserting a universally applicable truth about the ultimate origin of rulers."² Those who have ruled have done so solely because God instituted them.



Consider Paul's direction to live in submission to governing authorities. Where in your life is that most difficult to do? What influence does Paul's explanation of those authorities' source of power have on your decisions as a citizen?



How would you say the current culture's opposition compares to the opposition from the Roman Empire? Why do you think so? How does that color your understanding of what Paul was directing his original audience to do?

In making clear that his authority for his directive was not from himself, Paul followed the directive with a statement of divine consequences. Precisely that the governing authorities were instituted by God, resisting those governmental officials “resists what God has appointed.” All of a sudden, the seriousness of what Paul was saying was raised several levels. The believers were not merely breaking laws or disrespecting oppressive bureaucrats; they were rejecting that which God Himself had set in place.

Judgment here did not necessarily refer to civic retribution from those spurned government authorities, as Paul had not at this point clarified what he meant by the negative consequence. Still, as the following verses would communicate, it would be naïve for the believers not to associate some sort of civic consequences with the rejection of governmental authorities.

2. Be Subject and Have No Fear (Romans 13:3-5)

Verse 3 introduced the civic function of the appointed authorities, namely, they kept the peace through punishing the bad and rewarding the good. In other words, even in their fallen condition, they were to pursue a form of justice in accordance with God's purposes for the world. Paul's connection with rulers and terror was an extremely powerful one for his original audience. The conflict among the Roman believers that had, in part, led Paul to write his letter to them in the first place, was due to the recent return of Jewish believers that had been expelled from Rome for a nine-year period by the emperor, Claudius. When the Jewish believers returned, for almost a decade Gentiles had led the network of house churches that formed the church in Rome. The Jewish believers were returning from tasting the fury of spurned governmental authority firsthand. Therefore, Paul's presentation of a formula by which rulers were no longer a terror would have been welcomed news.

What was Paul’s secret to living without perpetual fear of the government? Be a good citizen. That was the whole secret; the Roman believers were to exhibit good conduct. That good conduct would not only alleviate their terror, it would also place them in a position to be rewarded by those same governing authorities. To keep such a statement from sounding hopelessly naïve, Paul returned to the foundation of his argument: the ruler, after all, was God’s appointed servant.

? Describe an episode in which a person’s public persona aided them in dealing with an issue with governmental ties. How did that person’s public persona impact his or her experience? What gospel impact or gospel conversation are you aware of from that incident?

? What feelings do you experience when you read of rulers being used by God as instruments of justice?


Verse 4 portrays the governmental ruler as an instrument of justice on God’s behalf. What is more, the ruler is referred to as God’s “servant.” It would be appropriate at this point to point out that God’s servants can serve Him unconsciously. For biblical precedent on the matter, one would need only to return to the episodes of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar mentioned above. Even Nebuchadnezzar was not aware of Yahweh’s activity through him—until God took his sanity. So it would have been for Paul’s audience of Roman believers to attach Paul’s words here to the Roman emperor.


Precisely because the governing authorities were part of God’s appointed leadership in the world, the believers were to submit to them. Paul summarized his argument to this point in verse 5 by highlighting once again the two reasons submission must occur. First, there would be wrath for those who arrogantly refused to submit. Second, the believer was to submit out of conscience. “Conscience” in Paul’s usage here referred to “the believer’s knowledge of God’s will and purposes” according to Moo.³ There was a deeper cause for submission to the rulers than conveniently avoiding wrath or staying out of the spotlight of the local authorities. This was more profoundly a matter of agreeing with God’s will and purpose.

3. Perform Your Civic Duty (Romans 13:6-7)

The final two verses of the section deal with a practical outflow of submission to governing authority: taxes. Paul was leading to applied expression of the theologically corrective teaching he had just given. His readers were to exercise their conscience that agreed with God's will and purpose by, in the purest way possible, putting their money where their mouth was. Moo says, "Here Paul is suggesting that the Roman Christians should acknowledge in their own habit of paying taxes to the government an implicit recognition of the authority that the government possesses over them."²⁴

As if anticipating the response of his readers, as he had all the way through Romans to this point, Paul once again circled back to the fact that the authorities were God's servants. Because they were God's servants and because of the conscience of the believers to be in agreement with God's will and work in the world, they were to pay the required taxes to the governmental authorities.

 How naturally do you associate governmental leaders with "God's servants"? How does the example of Nebuchadnezzar help your understanding?

 How does a believer's required response to governmental authorities change when those authorities attempt to press believers into violating their belief in God? How does the difference between submission and obedience guide that response?

When those who are imbued with power and authority abuse such power as a way to force God's people to reject God, a break always comes in the biblical record. The nations God used to judge His people were judged themselves for the cruelty with which they accomplished that task.

Conclusion

Paul's letter to the Roman Christians was one of the few letters he wrote to churches he did not plant. Remarkably, with its scope and depth of theological richness, the letter was to a group of believers Paul only knew by reputation. One of the great challenges Paul had was speaking into the troubled context of the divided church in the midst of a tyrannical regime. In doing so, however, he provided great application for believers today.

First, God is our only ultimate authority. When seeking to apply this extremely difficult text in the delicacy of living as a believer in a world that seeks to reject Christ, the foundation of any path toward our political way is the ultimate authority of God. While God may have instituted the governmental authorities, that has no guaranteed bearing on the individual leaders' spiritual condition. In light of that, when the submission of good citizenship conflicts with the spiritual doctrine of the Christian's belief system, the Christian must remember that only God is sovereign and ultimately authoritative.

Second, the manner in which a believer lives in society matters to God. The admonition to live in submission to secular rulers is well applied in the type of citizen the believer is. Living in submission to governing authorities means obeying the law, living up to financial responsibilities, exercising the rights afforded by that government, and loving one's neighbor as himself or herself. Consider the relational condition of our culture. The profound impact a believer can make in simply loving those God has entrusted to him or her as neighbors is incredible. God cares how His people live in society.

Third, part of submitting to governmental authorities is praying for them. If the function of government and the appointing of its leaders are an act of God, then the prayer support of those appointed leaders is a spiritual matter. In an age when information is not only accessible, but inescapable, believers have great access to information that can inform the way they pray for the leaders that God has appointed over them. In addition to praying for those leaders, the believer has the opportunity through local offices to make their prayer support for that leader known.

? Who are the governmental authorities that exercise the most influence over your life? How do you pray for them regularly? How would you rate the specificity of your prayers?

? How does it change your perception of government to read the number of times that Paul refers to those leaders as God’s servants? How would you say you need to respond when you disagree with those leaders?

? Why do you think God’s appointment of political leaders can seem like such a conflict of ideals? Consider a candidate that you’ve not agreed with; how does that change your answer?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Christ demonstrated respect for civic laws (“render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”) while confronting legalistic religious law.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: One of the believer’s greatest opportunities to demonstrate the transformational love of Christ is through loving his or her neighbor. That, in part, means being a model citizen according to earthly authorities unless this is in contradiction with biblical truth.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Finding Our Way With Gender

Main Passages

- Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13-16

Session Outline

1. Let's Start at the Beginning (Genesis 1:27)
2. The Wonder of Creation (Psalm 139:13-14)
3. God's Wisdom Before the Beginning (Psalm 139:15-16)

Memorize

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

- Romans 13:1, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Genesis 2:18-25
- Tuesday - Genesis 5:1-2
- Wednesday - Romans 1:22-23
- Thursday - Titus 2:1-8
- Friday - Deuteronomy 22:5
- Saturday - Galatians 3:28

References

¹Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.