

## **God and Government** Romans 12:1-2, 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17

Portions adapted from, "How To Get Along In The World", by Tom Fuller @ Sermon Central.com

Do you remember the **Kingdom of Heaven**? This is not the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus spoke about – no, this kingdom was located a few miles east of Salem, Oregon – the state capitol.

This kingdom was set up by a man who figured because he was a Christian, he was no longer covered by the laws of this society. So he created his own drivers license, car plates, even passports; and decided that he was not liable for any property taxes. The courts of Marion County had another view – and eventually seized the land and sold it at auction – imagine that, the Kingdom of Heaven sold on eBay!

Anyway – this man fell into a common misconception among some Christians – or folks claiming to be Christian – that is, as members of God's kingdom we don't have to obey the laws of this world. The apostle Paul would very much disagree with him.

In Chapter 12 of Romans, Paul the Apostle gave us a "quick start" guide for how to live a life that honors God, how to live & grow within the family of God, and how to live with those around us. Now in Chapter 13 he writes about how the Christian should live in society. Not only does he say that we should obey the laws of the land – but we need to submit to the government and respect the officials who have authority over us; and yes, pay our taxes.

A few years after Paul wrote these words he was beheaded by the very authorities that he here defends. In fact, by the time Paul wrote these words he had been in trouble with authorities in many places and had been jailed and beaten and otherwise abused. You would think by the experiences Paul had with governing authorities he would tell us never to trust them. If anyone had a reason to call for rebellion against corrupt governing authorities, Paul did. Yet, what does he tell us here? "Be subject." His advice raises many questions.

### **How does one submit to an authority that is hostile to the cause of Christ?**

Did not the early apostles defiance of their imposed gag order by the Jewish authorities give us a different example in Acts 4:18-31? Were their actions contrary to Romans 13?

**And what sneaking Bibles into countries** where it was illegal to do so. Some missionaries have been caught and jailed. Others were traced and the people who received the Bibles were punished. Is this practice at odds with Romans 13?

**Our own nation was established in rebellion** to the authority of English rule. Indeed lack of trust in – and respect for – the government seems to be a part of our national DNA. Is this out of line with Romans 13?

During the Holocaust, in Germany and the occupied countries, when Jews, gypsies, and mental patients were rounded up and systematically killed, many preachers used this text to justify going along with the government, while other people and pastors sheltered and helped these people escape. There were also those, like the clergyman Deitrich Bonhoffer who openly criticized the government and even participated in an assassination attempt of Hitler. He was caught by the Germans and eventually hanged. Who was interpreting Romans 13 correctly?

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities;  
for there is no authority except from God,  
and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.  
Romans 13:1

Oscar Cullmann in his book, The State in the New Testament, writes that, “few sayings in the New Testament have suffered as much misuse as this one,” (Romans 13:1). What does this section of Romans mean for us today? How can we interpret it in light of what seem to be conflicting examples in scripture? Let us give it a try.

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First of all this passage must be understood in light of its context. Paul just wrote that we should not take vengeance but leave room for God’s wrath. Now in this chapter he tells us that the governments ruling the earth have been given this authority by God to serve as His agents for executing His wrath.

Do they always get it right? Of course not. Politicians are sinners. Government bureaucracies are full of sinners, which means that sometimes governments make sinful laws. Anywhere you have fallen humans you have sin, even in the church. Yet, God tells us to obey our leaders as long as it doesn’t conflict with our obedience to God, which is, I think the proper understanding of Romans 13 (we’ll expand upon this a bit later).

Why? We don’t see the big picture. We don’t know what God is up to behind the scenes. In the Old Testament, God worked through downright pagan and vicious nations such as the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians to bring Israel to her knees. God even called the Persian King Cyrus “God’s anointed,” the same word for “Messiah” (Isaiah 45:1). God has always been and continues to be at work behind the scenes to

bring about His master plan in our world, even when we don't see it. So we need to obey the law and submit to the government authorities over us as long as it doesn't violate our higher allegiance to Christian Law. The government is in God's service whether they know it or not.

Lets look at verse one in a little more closely. First, the word our bible translates "be subject" (other translations use "submit") Is a military term meaning "to rank under." In the military, they train and train and train so that when an order is given, the troops respond without having to figure things out for themselves – otherwise the enemy would be upon them before they could get organized. This happens by ranks – the general gives the "big picture" order, which his officers interpret according to their section of the force and pass it down accordingly to the enlisted men.

The General might say: "*we need to take this area in order to route the enemy.*" By the time that gets to the private its: "*Charge up this hill and take out that machine gun nest.*" With everyone doing their part the battle is hopefully won as the military works with precision. But, if the private decides – "*no, I think it would be better if I stayed here and took a nap,*" the squad's task would be more difficult – and if everyone decided in their own way what to do – the General's orders would not be fulfilled.

The other day, I heard from one Private's diary, a critical accounting of Stonewall Jackson's response towards deserters. When two soldiers left the battlefield to carry a wounded comrade back to the medical tent, he had them arrested and hung for desertion. You might think that was an overly severe response to their leaving the field. But as he explained to them, we have medics whose job it is to evacuate the wounded, your job was to hold the line, and in breaking rank you could have cost us the battle.

So keeping rank is necessary for an orderly society. Thus we are to submit to the government. When the government passes a law that says "don't drive over 65 miles an hour" then we should submit to that, we should obey that law – as I'm sure we all do. If we all decided that speed laws weren't a good idea for us and drove 100 miles an hour then there would be a terrible rash of accidents and people would die. It's not important whether you believe that 65 is the right speed – but if it's the law, then we should obey.

But, you say, what about laws that conflict with God's laws. Glad you asked. In the military there is such a thing as an "illegal order." And there are processes whereby a lower ranking soldier can make a commanding officer prove the legality of an order – like ordering genocide, for instance. Similarly, in society, if a law directly conflicts with the laws of God, then we have an appeal to a higher authority; but we should also be willing to trust God and accept the consequences for appealing to Him, particularly in a

**nation that is it rebellion against God.** For instance – when the Jewish leaders told Peter and John not speak the name of Jesus anymore – they replied: But Peter and John answered them, *‘Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).* This act of defiance would later get Peter and John flogged – not a light punishment – after which they *rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name ( Acts 5:40-41).* But modern examples also abound: the case of a Christian cake baker is currently before the Supreme Court.

But, for the most part, we aren’t going to see this kind of thing – and we should do our best to “rank under” the laws of society so that we are all safer and cared for.

But what about bad rulers – like Hitler, or Sadaam Husein? You mean God sets them up too? Yes – but it doesn’t mean that they are good, or that they are saved – but God will use them as pawns in moving His plans forward. Thank God we don’t live under such a dictator; remember that Paul wrote this advice in Roman times – under terrible dictators.

Paul makes this obedience he talks about even more imperative

Therefore whoever resists authority  
resists what God has appointed,  
and those who resist will incur judgment.  
For rulers are not a terror to good conduct,  
but to bad Romans 13:2-3

So God establishes earthly authority to punish the wrong doers and reward those who do right. If there were no civil authority, do you think those bent on doing evil would waste one minute creating total anarchy in society? Our problem is that we want it both ways – we want to be protected, but we don’t want anyone messing in our business. Read on:

Do you wish to have no fear of the authority?  
Then do what is good,  
and you will receive its approval;  
for it is God’s servant for your good.

But if you do what is wrong,  
you should be afraid,  
It is the servant of God  
to execute wrath on the wrongdoer  
Romans 13:3-4

So if you break the law and get punished, the government is working as God's servant for punishing wrongdoers. It doesn't mean that government takes the place of God's judgment on the sinner – but God established governments to help people live together in a civilized manner.

Therefore one must be subject,  
not only because of wrath  
but also because of conscience  
Romans 13:5

So its even more than just obeying because you are afraid of being punished – Paul says obedience to authority is a matter of conscience. What does this mean?

It means we should obey just because it is the right thing to do – to have the attitude “well no one's looking now so I can do whatever I want” is contrary to the kind of person God is making us. All the “don't's” of all the law's set by the government really don't define “good,” but rather the bottom line for civil behavior, the minimal level of performance. You can be completely law abiding and still be hateful, prejudiced, greedy. But Jesus said that all the “don'ts” of the law can be summed up in two positives – love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. If we would follow those principals all the time, even when the “law” isn't looking, we won't have any problems; we will be living well above the minimum.

Of course – that doesn't apply to paying taxes – does it?

Pay to all what is due to them  
taxes to whom taxes are due,  
revenue to whom revenue is due,  
respect to whom respect is due,  
honor to whom honor is due.  
Romans 3:7

Yes – Paul says we should pay our taxes. Jesus said the same thing – “*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*” (Matthew 12:17).

Behind the idea of our paing what is due is a word meaning to “render” or “give back.” To give back implies that Emperor has done something for you. In Jesus' time, the government—while corrupt—did offer roads, water, police, courts of justice, and

sometimes relief for the poor. Today we must admit that, as big and inefficient and sometimes misguided as our government can be, it also does some great things: it offers us the protection of the finest military in the world. We have outstanding police and fire fighters that ensure our safety – and need our prayers. Our government offers help to the helpless; even with the imperfections of the welfare system, many who truly need help receive it. Our government helps maintain society. And it even delivers the mail! So we give back to the Emperor what is his due. But as one tax adviser advised: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s ... and not a penny more!”

Owe no one anything,  
except to love one another;  
for the one who loves another  
has fulfilled the law.

Romans 3:8

So how does one live a godly life in society? Paul says that it is not really about obeying laws or paying taxes it centers around owing love – the one debt we can never repay. We should never stop loving. It’s not an obligation we can fulfill, but a charge for us to follow – always. In view of the mercies God has shown us, another aspect of our god honoring life of worship is to be a good citizen, *if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, living peaceably with all* – including the government you live under (Romans 12:18).

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Now let’s get practical. How do we do this? How do we live as a God honoring citizen?

1. We have already covered obeying the laws and paying our taxes.
2. But what about respect and honor? Our government hasn’t done much lately to earn our respect, but respecting the office even if you have a hard time respecting the person in the office is the way we live here as ambassadors of the kingdom of Heaven (the real one, not the one in Oregon). I like the way Peter summed up our freedom in Christ along with our dual citizenship here.

**As servants of God, live as free people,**  
yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.  
Honor everyone. Love the family of believers.  
Fear God. Honor the emperor. 1Peter2:16-17

Because of who we are: by faith and rebirth, **we are "servants of God"** – and because of who they are, by God's provident decision, **they are "servants of God."** we owe them the respect of their office, duties, and responsibilities; as Paul wrote, *they do not bear the sword in vain.*

3. Pray for our leaders. In his letter to Timothy, Paul urged that we ***pray for everyone, but especially for kings and all who are in high positions...*** (1 Timothy 2:1) So pray for the mayor, pray for your state and national Congressional leaders, pray for your governor, pray for your judges, local, state, and national. Pray for your president, whether you voted for him or not. Pray for the members of Cabinet. Pray for your pastor. Pray for your church leaders. Pray for everyone you can think of, and particularly those in authority.

What happens when you pray for such leaders? Paul continues, *so that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all Godliness and dignity* (1 Timothy 2:2). Things go smoother for us. We are blessed, because God answers our prayers and helps our leaders to lead better.

I haven't always agreed with our President, and these days very seldom with all the animosity in Congress. Sometimes they all make me angry. Sometimes I don't like what they have done. But I try to pray for them regularly. Have you ever noticed how much that office ages people, regardless of party? They come in with dark hair and leave with gray! Every president has pleased me at times and disappointed me at times, whether Republican or Democrat. Whether they're pleasing or upsetting me, I can still pray for them.

4. **We should vote, get involved in community programs** and perhaps **even run for office**. Our unique experiment in democracy is based on the concept that we elect those whom share our values and whom we want to govern us. And if we can't find anyone we want to vote for, then perhaps it's time we ran for an office. Not voting is not being a good citizen. Not being involved in community service is not being a good citizen; and, perhaps, not running for public office as well.

*John R. Stott wrote, "What, then, is the biblical basis for social concern? Why should Christians get involved? In the end there are only two possible attitudes which Christians can adopt towards the world: Escape or Engagement... 'Escape' means turning our backs on the world in rejection, washing our hands of it...and steeling our hearts against its agonized cries for help. In contrast, 'engagement' means turning our faces towards the world in*

*compassion, getting our hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, and feeling deep within us the stirring of the love of which cannot be contained. ...*

*If we truly love our neighbors, and because of their worth desire to serve them, we shall be concerned for their total welfare, the well-being of their soul, their body and their community. And our concern will lead to practical programs." -- John R. W. Stott, Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1995), pp. 14, 19.*

5. And if we disagree with what we see happening then we should **respectfully speak up**. Peaceful, public protest has always been a vital part of how this government works. In Russia or China, such protest could make you disappear, in the U.S. the worst it will get you is a t.v. interview. But some Christians have a difficult time determining whether, and when, to let their voices be heard on the great moral issues of the day. More than 400 years ago Martin Luther gave some of the best advice on this matter:

*"If I profess with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God, except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved."*

6. **But above all: honor God.** God is our ultimate leader from whom all other authority flows. When we become a Christian believer, we yield ourselves to God's authority above all else. The Bible uses the image of slavery: before we were a believer, we were enslaved to our sin, but now we are voluntarily enslaved to God. We have trusted ourselves fully to the one who knows us better than we know ourselves.

At times throughout history, God's authority has clashed with human authority. It certainly happened in Paul's day. When forbidden to speak of their faith, Peter and John's answer was simple. "*We must obey God rather than man!*" If you have to choose between the two, go with God. He is your ultimate authority. An Old Testament example of this is Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who wanting to reserve worship only for the one true God, refused to bow down to idols,. As they were about to receive their capital punishment, they respectfully told the king, "*If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up*" (Daniel 3:17-18). They were quite respectful, but their response still ticked off the king so much that he



heated the furnace extra hot. And through it all, God supernaturally saved them from the heat.

If you ever come to the conclusion that you have to choose God over government, do it with much prayer and humility. Our pride can easily get in the way and deceive us into thinking we are God's lone spokesperson to condemn too quickly an imperfect government.

**Martin Luther King, Jr.** modeled humbly choosing God over government with his policy of non-violent resistance. He called it a "courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love." And in so doing, he helped change a sinful government which led to a better world. We still have a long way to go, but we have improved greatly from the '60s.

So, to conclude, God's word tells us to obey the law, pay our taxes, to respect and pray for our leaders, and above all to honor God. That's how we can live a God honoring life in the public square; because we know who ultimately is in charge and whom we actually serve.

August 1994, as a Korean Air jet plane was landing it skidded across a rain soaked runway and rammed a safety barricade. There were 160 passengers on board and just before the plane exploded into flames they all escaped to safety. What was the cause of the accident? According to news reports, the pilot and the co-pilot had gotten into a fist fight...over who was in charge of the landing controls.

Now, you'd have thought they'd have figured that out before they left the ground. But because they forgot who was in charge, they endangered their lives, the lives of their crew, the lives of their passengers, and they destroyed a fairly expensive piece of aircraft. All because they didn't know who was in charge!

WHO'S IN CHARGE? (Answer: God is)

If I Trust God, and if God is in charge then I must be willing to submit to the authorities over me. Why? Because God is bigger and badder than any authority of man.

But if I lose my trust in God - if I don't look to Him for my deliverance, my temptation will be to grab the controls. My temptation will be to fight to have MY way. Let's hope that doesn't happen to any of us - and that it may stop happening in our country.

Let us pray about this:

Thank you, God, that you have allowed us to be part of the American experiment, this land of opportunity. Thank you for a nation based on freedom. We pray that we can keep it. We know we need your help. Help us, Lord, to take your word seriously as we seek to obey the law as model citizens, as we lift up our government leaders to you in prayer, and as we seek to honor you in all things. Help us to completely trust our lives to you. You are a great God. We love you. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

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*This is from another sermon, I ran across while preparing my message for the week. It is far more than I could preach, but dealt with a vital question that I raised during my introduction. So I share it with you sermon readers as a bonus thought. Also, there is a beautiful prayer attached at the end. – john .*

### **Who's In Charge Here?**

Contributed by Jeff Strite on Jul 9, 2017 @ SErmonCentral.com

Here is a question that has plagued many American Christians for decades:

***If Christians should be subject to their authorities AND IF America's Founding Fathers were mostly Bible-believing God-fearing men - why did they rebel against King George? WHY was there a Revolution? Didn't they trust God?***

I found this meme on the internet (<https://i.imgflip.com/16u9g5.jpg> - it says "Happy Treason Day. Ungrateful Colonials"). This cute graphic embodies the problem for us. You see - at the time – America's colonies were subjects of the British Empire. King George WAS the authority over the colonies.

A few things complicated this issue: First, there was the fact that much of the call for Revolution came from pulpits of churches throughout the colonies. The preachers were robed in black and were often referred to as the "Black Robed Regiment". King George said he feared them more than colonial soldiers in the field.

2nd – the American Revolution was either one of the only or the ONLY revolution to have turned out as well as it did. The majority of revolutions tended to be like the one in France. Thousands of people were executed (most often publicly by guillotine) and there was unbelievable graft and corruption. America's revolution was a remarkable exception to the rule.

On top of that, there's the undeniable fact that God seemed to repeatedly intervene in support of the Revolutionaries. For example:

ILLUS: In October of 1780 (4 years into the Revolutionary War) a storm known as the "Great Hurricane" pounded the West Indies for 7 days. On October 10th, the hurricane 1st struck Barbados with winds estimated at 200 mph, and it destroyed nearly all the houses, including those made of stone. British forts were demolished and there was not a single tree that remained standing. And it not only destroyed things ON the islands... it also struck ships offshore. The British fleet which was in harbor at St. Lucia lost eight of its 12 ships and 100s of sailors (One British warship was dumped down on top of a hospital). Historians believe that the ships lost in this disaster led to Britain's defeat at the Battle of the Chesapeake which ultimately allowed George Washington to force the British Army to surrender. The Great Hurricane's costly damage to Britain's forces also reinforced the argument by London's pro-peace faction, which had long been in favor of quitting the long and expensive Revolutionary War. Ultimately that persuaded Parliament to grant the Americans their independence.

So why would God seemingly honor the American Revolutionaries? I'm only guessing here... but I think I have an idea. You see, America's revolutionaries started by appealing to God

- Prayers were constantly offered in the churches, the statehouses and especially in the Continental Congress (one prayer at the Continental Congress went on for 3 hours... and that was very much the norm).
- America's leaders constantly appealed to Britain for relief. As late as April of 1775 the Colonists still did NOT want to become independent - they just wanted to have their grievances resolved

3rd – even as they went to war they STILL sought to appeal to Britain for peace

- And, even when war was declared... they were STILL appealing for peace. When the English forces were bottled up at Boston on January 1, 1776, George Washington raised a new flag on Prospect Hill for British forces to see. It's called the "Grand Union Flag" (<https://www.hpsd.k12.pa.us/archives/clausen/flags/revolution/images/R10a.jpg>). Do you see anything unusual about this flag? That's right in the corner (where our flag displays stars) was the British Union Jack. Even at this juncture, this flag was Washington's way of saying they were firmly united in their determination to fight for their liberty and yet reluctant to defy the mother country. (R.Digest 9/69 p. 143)

Now I'm not trying to say that America's leaders were necessarily perfect in all that they did, but at the core of the Revolution was an appeal to God and appeal to England for peace

Now I said all that... to say this: When dealing with those in authority you must ALWAYS treat them with respect. This is non-negotiable. No matter who they are, what they've done, or what they stand for you are obligated as a servant of the most High God to show them respect.

2ndly - you must ALWAYS look to God for your protection. You're welcome to write your congressman, defend yourself in court and file briefs and motions till the cows come home, but you EVER take your eye off of God... you'll fail. Guaranteed. Because God promised that in Psalm 127:1 "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain."

After the Revolution was won America had a Declaration of Independence, but still did not have the Constitution that our nation so reveres. And that Constitution almost didn't get approved. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787 the representatives of the new nation gather to vote on that document, but the problem was – now that they'd won the war, many of them found they didn't like each other all that much. The room seemed constantly filled with rancor and hatred and name calling. There was not a man present who had any real hope of finding an effective solution. It was then that Ben Franklin rose to speak.

*"In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor.... And have we now forgotten this powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?"*

*I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: "that God governs in the affairs of man." And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"*

*"We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings that except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this. I also believe that, without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel; we shall be divided by our little, partial local interests; our projects will be confounded; and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a byword down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing government by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war, or conquest."*

*I therefore beg leave to move that, henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessing on our deliberation be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business."*

(The Light and the Glory Peter Marshall, David Manuel, p. 342 quoting In God We Trust edited by Norman Cousins, p. 42)

### **A Prayer for Our Leaders. By Patricia Nordman**

Holy Spirit, we come before you this day in humility and gratitude to plead for your blessings upon those who govern to insure our life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Grant them in abundance your gifts of:

WISDOM: that they may always be guided to place the spiritual good of communities and the nation as the highest good.

UNDERSTANDING: that they may recognize the simplicity of truth.

COUNSEL: that they may recognize the will of God under circumstances that discourage lesser men and women.

FORTITUDE: that they may be given the spiritual and physical strength to accept the inevitable burdens of leadership with courageous endurance.

KNOWLEDGE: that they may know the vastness of their mission and yet retain humility of spirit and charity for each and every soul.

PIETY: that in the manifold duties of their offices they may always find time to communicate quietly with YOU and therein find peace for their souls.

FEAR OF THE LORD: that they would forego worldly honors and recognition rather than bow to the will of evil men.

May you bless and direct our leaders for as long as it is your will for them to guide the destiny of this community, the nation, and the world.

LORD, we thank you that you hear our prayer. Please remind us, too, that you are still in control! Amen.