

ROMANS 13:1-7

OFFERING OUR SUBMISSION

You can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em.

I have heard this said of men. I have heard this said of women. But couldn't we all say this, about our government?

You can't live with it. You can't live with the taxes, and the waste, and the foolish rules, and the unjust court decisions, and the corruption.

Yet you can't live without it. Imagine a day without an army. Or without a police force. Or without garbage trucks.

You can't live with it, and you can't live without it. So how do we live with our government, or any government?

All through Romans 12, Paul has answered the question, "If the gospel is true, how do we live?" He has written of what we offer to Jesus and others, since Jesus has offered himself for us.

Now Paul tells us to offer our submission to the government - the body that we cannot live with, and that we cannot live without.

Why does Paul write these words to his readers of yesterday and today?

Maybe because of frustration.

Paul has just written, "Do not repay anyone evil with evil." God will bring justice. That would be hard to hear for people who had suffered because of their government.

As you may remember from back at the beginning of our journey through Romans, many of Paul's readers had probably been in Rome in the year A.D. 49, when the Romans had kicked out the Jews. Since Christians were often associated with Jews, Christians may have been kicked out, too.

So now they read, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," and they might wonder in frustration, "Is there any hope of justice in this life?"

Maybe Paul writes these words because of rebellion.

As we discover when we read other New Testament letters, some in the early church had no time for earthly institutions like government. They knew the course of history was different with the coming of Jesus, and they were inclined to believe they didn't need to bother with human government.

No need to pay taxes. No need to pay attention to the rulers. We are living in the kingdom of Jesus, so who cares about the kingdom of Rome?

Paul responds by writing, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities." The word here translated "submit" is a military term, meaning "to rank under." As Christians, we "rank ourselves" under the government.

But why do we do this, and how do we do this? We are not so different than Paul's readers. We may not suffer the persecution they had faced and would face, but we must admit that frustration and even rebellion dwell in our hearts, as we think about human government.

WHY DO WE SUBMIT? Paul knows, and we know, that human government is far from perfect. So why does he offer this clear command?

From these words, we discover two reasons: because of wrath, and because of conscience.

We submit, BECAUSE OF WRATH.

What does that mean? We need to understand that God establishes our governments for a specific purpose: the purpose of wrath.

Let's grasp this by putting together two thoughts.

First, God establishes rulers.

* Verse 1: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

God established. That means God has appointed. God has arranged. God has put everything in order,

as he wants it to be.

It's like when you set up your room, your apartment, or your home. It is your right to arrange everything, as you want it to be.

So what is the result of this?

* Verse 2: "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

Since God has established rulers, this is the general rule: if you resist those rulers, you are resisting God.

In fact, you will face "judgment" for this rebellion. This "judgment" could be eternal condemnation, but I believe Paul is more likely thinking of some sort of punishment in this life, probably from the government you have opposed.

God establishes rulers. So far, so good, until you start to think about some of the rulers God has established. Even the people we consider to be the best of human rulers, are often foolish and sometimes even cruel.

But we have to grasp this truth. God, for his purposes, raises up people to direct the course of human history, even if he condemns what they do.

You see this in the Old Testament prophets. God's people rebel. So God raises up another nation, another nation he will also judge, to bring punishment to God's people for their rebellion. He despises the sin of that second nation. Yet for his purposes, he will establish that nation for a season of history.

God establishes rulers. Then we get to this issue of wrath, when we see that rulers punish evildoers.

Paul writes in verses 3 and 4, "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you."

"For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Rulers punish evildoers. Rulers bear "the sword." In the church, some have taught that this is a reference to the state's power to put wrongdoers to death. More likely, it's a general reference to the state's right to punish all sorts of wrong, in all sorts of ways.

That's what the government does. That's what Paul wants his readers to know, as they deal with their frustration. God has ordained our governments, even the worst governments, to punish wrong. So we submit to them.

But does this mean the government is always right? Of course not. Paul never says that. We know governments do wrong -- from the Bible, and from our experience. But the central idea here is true, and we can also see this in our Bibles and in our experience: rulers punish evildoers.

God establishes rulers, and rulers punish evildoers. We submit to our government, because of wrath.

We also submit, BECAUSE OF CONSCIENCE.

In verse 5, Paul writes that we must "submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience."

What is conscience? One writer writes that it is "the believer's knowledge of God's will and purposes." It's kind of an internal radar. The weather radar tells us whether something good or something bad is on the way. The radar of conscience tells us whether something before us is good or evil.

But what does conscience have to do with government? If God has said to submit to the government, and we wrongly fail to submit, we have not only gone against the laws of man, but we have opposed the law of God.

It's like we have said to our children. God has ordained us to be your parents. You are called to obey us. When you do not, you are not merely sinning against us. You are sinning against God, because he is the One who established this arrangement.

This is Paul's answer to the rebellion that may have been festering in the hearts of the Romans. You cannot just say, "I will only obey God, and forget about the government." Part of obeying God, is obeying the

government. For even this season after the coming of Jesus, the government is here by God's establishment, so we are to be in the habit of obeying government, as an act of obedience to God.

We do not submit, just because we are afraid of government's wrath. We submit, because we want to obey the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

I do not drown my insides with liquor, then drive my car, not just because I know I might get caught by the police, but because I know I would be sinning against the God who has loved me in Jesus Christ.

I do not fudge on my tax forms, not just because I know I will face a big fine if I get caught, but because I know I would be rebelling against authority ordained by the God who has loved me in Jesus Christ.

I do not take my trash and dump it along the Whitewater River, not just because I know the government is cleaning up lakes and rivers, but because I know I would be spoiling the land made by the God who has loved me in Jesus Christ.

We think about government, and we just think about government. But we need to think about the One who has established government as an agent of wrath for wrongdoers. In our consciences, we must know that our submission to the government, is ultimately submission to God.

But you are not satisfied, are you? I know I'm not! We wonder, what about past history and present reality? What about Hitler and Hussein and Stalin and Chavez?

What about our government? While we rightly rejoice in the good of our government, we must be honest and realize that it is still led by sinful people, and it is still full of foolishness, corruption, and so much else that is not right before God.

How does this work? HOW DO WE SUBMIT?

Let's start by realizing that this is not a new problem. God's story in the Bible has several stories of people who surely struggled with submission.

Think just of Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah. We admire them, yet we easily forget that they spent much of their lives, serving ungodly leaders.

How could they do it? How could they be true to the true God, yet loyal to these worshippers of false gods?

There is no neat formula to this. There is no easy answer to this. But Paul's words here, and Jesus' words in the gospels, guide us toward the "how" of our submission to the government.

How do we submit? Let's use Jesus' words, which Paul must have heard. We give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and we give to God what is God's.

WE GIVE TO CAESAR WHAT IS CAESAR'S.

You may know the story. Jesus' opponents are trying to tempt him into saying something that will get him in trouble, so they bring him a Roman coin, and they ask about paying taxes to the emperor Caesar.

Jesus says to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. In other words, give him what you owe him. Our "Caesar" is our government. Give what you owe, to the government.

Paul writes in verses 6 and 7: "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

Think of the four aspects of what we owe:

* Taxes. We know what those are!

* Revenue. This probably refers to "indirect taxes" - fees from the government, when you receive services from the government.

* Respect. This word is best translated "fear." This goes back to the idea of the wrath of the state, which God has established.

* Honor. This does not mean we worship the President, or treat him like some king. But it does mean we value our government and our leaders.

We pray for our leaders, as Paul urges us in 1 Timothy, in the hope that we will be able to lead "peaceful and quiet lives, in all godliness and holiness."

We treat our leaders with the honor that comes with their position, even when we disagree with them. We speak with respect about them, and maybe even to them.

This is hard, especially in a culture with such a loud din of voices, shouting and screaming out opinions on everything. This is also hard, especially in these days when we know so much about what happens in our government, and how so much of it is appalling to us.

We may think only negatively about government. We become nothing but cynical about government. Some even hate government.

But God's words, through Paul, direct us otherwise. Government can be a nuisance and even a nemesis. But it can also be a positive agent for good, and we owe government and governors, our honor.

This "giving to Caesar what is Caesar's" also means we must reject the individualism of our culture, and we should strive to be good citizens.

If our children are in the public schools, we find ways to serve in those schools, without compromising what we believe.

If we have the opportunity to help with a government project of some sort, we offer help, while still holding true to our Christian principles.

We follow the procedures mandated by the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, even when they don't make much sense to us.

We join in giving thanks to those who have sacrificed health and even life, so that our nation can be free.

We pick up our trash...we vote...we don't drive where the barrier says, "Road Closed".

We may disagree, and we may express our disagreements, but we still strive to be loyal to the government God has established.

We give to Caesar, what is Caesar's.

As well, WE GIVE TO GOD, WHAT IS GOD'S.

This is the end of Jesus' words to his opponents, and I believe this is the truth that is woven through Paul's words here.

It is now, that we face all the kinds of questions that rush to our minds when we read these verses.

What if the government is wrong, or even evil?

What if I hate what the government is doing?

What if the government asks me to sin against God?

Is Paul saying that absolutely, positively, in every situation, no matter what...we must obey the government?

Here is the answer: give to God what is God's. Jesus Christ has given you back to God, by purchasing you for God, with his blood.

So where is your highest loyalty? It is to God. You serve and honor him, above everyone else. As we have seen, he is the Lord over our consciences.

But what does that mean? How do we sort through this? How do we give to God what is God's, when Caesar is still there, asking me to give, and I don't like what Caesar is asking me to give?

Here is a principle that I hope is helpful: We obey man because of God, and we only disobey man, when we must obey God, rather than man.

Remember: God wants us to obey these man-led governments. This is so, even when we don't like everything they do. Do you think Paul liked everything the Roman government did? What about Joseph, or Daniel, or Nehemiah? Did they approve of all the actions of their governments? Of course not! But still they obeyed, except when it was clear that they had to obey God, not man.

For example...

* In Daniel, the king asks Daniel to worship someone other than God. He cannot do it, and he will not do it. He continues to worship God.

* In Acts, the apostles are told to stop talking about Jesus. They cannot do it, and they will not do it. They continue to preach the gospel.

Hear the principle again: we obey man because of God, and we only disobey man, when we must obey God, rather than man.

This prevents an attitude that says, “I will obey only the laws I like.”

We are drawn to this attitude. We have frustration, and we are attracted to rebellion. We only want to obey, when we want to obey!

“I don’t like the law that permits the government to pay for certain abortions, so I won’t pay taxes.”

“I don’t like the law that requires me to get this permit to add a room to my house, so I will just do it without telling anyone.”

“I don’t like the law that keeps me from getting prescription drugs from another country, so I will just do it, anyway.”

No, no and no. We do not like all that our government does, and Paul’s readers did not like all their government did, but we must not just say, “I don’t like it, so I won’t do it. I will obey only the laws that I like.”

If that is your attitude, and if that is your habit, you are not following the clear commands of God’s word in this area of your life. You must repent of this, and ask God to change your attitude, and you must start to practice obedience to these governing authorities that God has established.

Yet this principle also expresses an attitude that says, “I will ultimately obey only the Lord.”

“If the government should ever tell me that I must help that young woman get an abortion, I will ultimately obey only the Lord.”

“If the government should ever tell me that I must commit cold-blooded murder on the battlefield, I will ultimately obey only the Lord.”

“If the government should ever tell me that I cannot worship with other believers, I will ultimately obey only the Lord.”

Yet even in this, we must be careful. We are so prone to rebellion.

If you believe you must disobey the government by ultimately obeying the Lord, I would urge you to take some careful steps, before you do this, if this is possible. You should:

* Pray and ask the Lord to search your heart. Why am I doing this? Am I really obeying you, or am I just following my rebellious desires?

* Search the Scriptures. Is there instruction on this? Are there stories like this? Does biblical teaching or example guide me here?

* Get counsel. Who knows me, and who knows the situation, and who can help me sort through this?

We want to find reasons to not submit. God through Paul wants us to find reasons to submit. We disobey only when we clearly must do so, not just when we do not like what our government is doing.

We obey man because of God, and we only disobey man, when we must obey God, rather than man.

I have heard this story in several versions from several families.

The little girl is having a problem, and the problem grows to the point that she must be put in the corner. She goes to the corner, and in her frustration she announces for any and all to hear,

“I may be sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!”

What is on your inside, as you think of offering submission to governing authorities?

This should be a fairly easy question for us, because we are so blessed with freedom and prosperity. Yet because we have so much access to what our government is doing, and because our hearts are sometimes so filled with frustration and often so quick to rebel, it’s not so easy, is it?

This could be a very tough question for us, if our freedom and prosperity should ever be threatened. This is a very tough question for many Christians in other nations.

We honor the God of the nations, and we adorn the gospel before our nation, with hearts of submission - to government, and to God.