



*When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do*

**“Conscientious Subjectors”**

Romans 13:1-7

The last time I taught this subject, the relation of the Christian to government, *it almost resulted in a fistfight!*

I might be exaggerating... But not by much. Christians, especially conservative Christians (like most of us), are very interested in the subject of civil government. Eavesdrop on conversations after church and a lot of them are about politics.

I want to tell you I have what I consider to be a control belief through which I approach the text. It is this. Christians all over the world, in every nation, hold a dual citizenship, but one citizenship takes priority over the other. We are citizens of Heaven first, *then* citizens of our nation, in our case the United States.

As citizens of Heaven we are also called upon to be ambassadors on the earth in every nation.

One more thing before we dig in and start unpacking the text. The key word for our understanding this is going to be “subject”; the key concept will be subjection. It’s not my idea! We see it in verse one, then again in verse five. When we might have a doubt about what to say, or about what Paul meant, we will fall back on our being in subjection as an overriding spiritual principle.

Romans 13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

“Let every soul” means *every* human being *anywhere* on the planet, at *any* time in history, including both believers and nonbelievers.

They are - **we are** - required by God to “be subject to the governing authorities.” “Subject” means exactly what you think it means - submissive, obedient. Paul wasn’t alone in telling us to be “subject” to rulers and authority. Peter said it, too, in First Peter 2:13.

Subjection certainly includes external compliance but it implies even more. Subjection focuses on the spirit or attitude of the individual which leads to compliance.

The words “that exist” mean **all human authority is delegated by God**. Whether democratic or not, whether heathen or God-fearing, every government which has the power to rule over its people has been granted that power and authority by God.

One author put it this way: “A government’s existence is proof that it is ordained of God and that it possesses divinely delegated authority.”

How can that be??? Can Iran *really* be a government granted power and authority by God?

Yes, it can, because God is sovereign, meaning at the very least that He has oversight of all things, including human governments.

We’re going to see the standards that God has for nations in just a minute. A nation like Iran certainly does not live up to God’s standards. He will ultimately hold them accountable. In the mean time, their authority has been delegated by Him, and its citizens are required to be in subjection.

It’s at this point we normally appeal to civil disobedience that is demanded when government calls upon us to disobey God. True; we must obey God rather than man, rather than the civil authorities.

Let me say a couple of things about civil disobedience. First, when the Bible tells us to obey God rather than civil government, it’s talking about a direct conflict with the commandments of God or the preaching of the

Gospel. It isn't talking about the myriad of political issues we may disagree with.

Second, if you disobey civil authorities you are to do so in subjection. We have significant instances of civil disobedience in the Bible to show us what it means to disobey in subjection.

1. In Daniel chapter three, Daniel's three friends were commanded to bow down before an image of gold. They refused, and rightly so, for they could not serve God and bow down to an idol. But they disobeyed in subjection. They did not refuse to obey all of the king's commands, only this one. They knew that disobedience might cost them their lives, and they were willing to pay this price. They did not advocate the overthrow of this government, and they were willing to submit to the death penalty if necessary.
2. In Acts chapter 5 the Sanhedrin demanded that the apostles (Peter and John) stop preaching in the name of Jesus. This they could not do, lest they disobey God. Though they could not and would not stop preaching about their resurrected Lord, they did not challenge the authority of this body. Their answer was evidence of their subjection: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

Often I hear Christians in America refer to what the Founding Fathers intended as per the Constitution of the United States. Their point is that our country is not really being governed the way they intended.

*I might agree!* But let's apply what we've learned from God's Word to our great nation. Paul didn't say, "let every soul be subject to the government that the Founding Fathers intended." He didn't say, "let every soul be subject to the government when it is living-up to God's standards for it." No, he said, "the authorities that exist [right now] are appointed by God." It doesn't mean they are right or good or godly. But it does mean we are to obey or be in subjection in our civil disobedience.

It might be helpful to remember that when Paul wrote these words the government that existed was that of Caesar Nero. The emperor was not known for being a godly person and he engaged in a variety of illicit acts, homosexual marriage being among them. In 64AD the great Roman fire occurred with Nero himself being suspected of the act of arson. In his writings the Roman senator and historian Tacitus recorded: "To get rid of the report [that he had started the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace."

I am quick to add that, in a country like ours, the Bible doesn't forbid us from being active in politics, from speaking out against things, from advocating change, etc. I'm definitely not saying that whatever the government decides is right, or that we can't protest or pass initiatives. That's all well and good.

I'm only saying what the Bible says - **that ultimately we are required to be subject to the governing authorities and, if we must disobey, to do so with the right spirit.**

There is a prevailing attitude in Christianity is that any acts of government that are not rooted and grounded in God's Word are acts of tyranny and may or must be resisted. Francis Schaeffer articulated that position when he said, "the basic principle of civil government and therefore, law, must be based on God's law as given in the Bible... Since the ruler is granted power conditionally, it follows that the people have the power to withdraw their sanction if the proper conditions are not fulfilled."

In other words, a government must follow these strict conditions and guidelines in order to be entitled to any obedience at all from people. A government that fails to meet these qualifications, according to Schaeffer, can be disobeyed.

The problem with that perspective is that Paul's teaching to be subject to government was at a time when the government was certainly not based upon God's law as given in the Bible. Yet he exhorted believers to be in subjection to it.

Romans 13:2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

I take this to mean that, short of the government telling me to sin or to deny Christ or to quit sharing the Gospel, if I “resist” civil authorities, I am resisting God Himself.

William MacDonald said, “Believers can live victoriously in a democracy, a constitutional monarchy, or even a totalitarian regime.”

The “judgment” I would bring on myself is both from the government and discipline from God.

Romans 13:3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

The role that government is called to play is linked to a realistic assessment of man's sinfulness. Society will be spoiled where sinful man is allowed to engage in all manner of evil, and society will never flourish for the common good where man is allowed to squander his life on himself and pursue relentlessly his own self-centered course.

The authorities are required by God to punish the evildoer and reward the one who does right.

I know what you are thinking. This is an ideal description. Plenty of governments are corrupt and do just the opposite - they punish those who are good and reward those who are evil.

Even if Paul was describing the ideal that government should aspire to, it does not open the door to my resistance to a more corrupt government. And if I do resist, I must do so in subjection. God will hold the nation accountable.

Romans 13:4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

As servants of God, rulers are expected to promote the good of the people - their security, tranquility, and general welfare. If any man insists on breaking the law, he can expect to pay for it, because the government has the authority to bring him to trial and punish him.

The word “sword” was carefully chosen. It most definitely indicates capital punishment. If Paul had intended only to say that the authorities can punish, he could have chosen the word “scepter.” He didn’t.

Romans 13:5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.

It isn’t only for fear of punishment that you must “be subject.” The external standard of punishment is the minimum standard for all citizens, believers and nonbelievers. As a believer, you have a higher standard - you want to maintain a pure “conscience” before God and men.

Conscience is our internal guide of what is right and what is wrong. But, as one author said, “while we must never do what our conscience condemns, we dare not assume that everything our conscience permits is good, since our conscience can become hardened and insensitive.”

Conscience is not infallible. It must be trained by our reading of the Bible.

What does conscience have to do with subjection to the government? Well, let me illustrate. It means I, as a Christian, should not have a radar detector in my car or truck so that I can speed and break the law! If I do, I’m planning on breaking the law and cannot think I am really in “subjection.”

It’s just an illustration, but it’s really true. If I truly have this internal attitude of subjection to the government because it shows I am in subjection to God, then if and when I break the law - **any law** - my conscience should be pricked.

Romans 13:6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.

This isn't a comment about economics or Reaganomics. It doesn't prefer a philosophy of big government or smaller government. It doesn't mean you can't take advantage of tax loopholes or tax breaks.

Paul was simply stating that government is supported by taxation and it is your responsibility to pay taxes.

Romans 13:7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

"Taxes" and "customs" speak to your fiscal responsibilities. "Fear" and "honor" speak to your spiritual responsibilities.

"Fear" and "honor" are due to the offices of the civil authorities. Even if we can't respect the personal lives of those holding the offices, we can and should still show "fear" and "honor." Quoting Exodus 22:28, Paul said in Acts 23:5, "YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE."

I challenge you to get through the presidential election showing "fear" and "honor" to those who currently hold office! It's a command, but one we sometimes disregard.

I titled this message, "Conscientious Subjectors." That's a pretty good summary thought of what my reaction to civil authorities, to earthly government, ought to be. I should conscientiously subject myself to the authorities - by obedience, an obedience that does not prick a pure conscience.

Should I be forced to disobey when government wants me to sin or quit sharing the Gospel, I must do so in subjection.