Who is in Authority?
Scripture Text: Romans 13:1-7

Introduction

In 1984, Sammy Hagar released a song called “I Can’t Drive 55”. The song was about not driving the speed limit, which at that time was fifty-five miles per hour. Sammy Hagar said that the song came from an incident when he was driving from Albany, New York at 2:00am in the morning and was burnt out from a lot of travel. He thought there was no one else on the road, but then a cop stopped him and gave him a ticket for doing sixty-two in a fifty-five MPH zone. Sammy supposedly told the cop, “I can't drive 55,” and thus that famous song was born. I can relate to Sammy. When I get into my car, I usually have somewhere to go and I do not want to waste time getting there. The speed limit, after all, is just a suggestion, right? I think to myself, “It won’t hurt to go faster. There are no cops around.” In that moment, though, I am choosing to disregard what the law is and do what I want. That is disobedience. That is pride, and that is not good.

Last week we read about how those who follow Jesus Christ ought to be a peaceful community. This passage speaks about the responsibility of all Christians to their governing authorities. Authority means that one has the right to impose obligations and to issue commands which others are responsible to obey. For instance, parents have authority over their children, so they have the right to tell their children what to do. Teachers in schools have authority over their students and have the right to give assignments to their students. Consequently, the students are responsible for obeying their teachers and will fail if they do not. The whole concept of authority is important to Christians, for the Christian life is profoundly concerned with obedience. Our faith is based on obedience, first to God and then to those He has placed in authority over us. We are to obey those who have authority over us, but where does authority originate?

Obeying the Government Is Obeying God

This passage tells us that we are to “be subject to” or obey the government. This may seem logical at times and at other times it may seem completely wrong. Our genuine love for God (Romans 12:9), though, means we will respect the things He has instituted, such as government. We see this in the first two verses of this passage.

**Romans 13:1-2**  
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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

Notice the words here in the first verse. Every person, not just some, but all of us, is to submit to the civil government. No exception! That seems like a fairly comprehensive and clear command, does it not? This means we are to obey what the government tells us to do. When the government says to go fifty-five miles per hour on the highway, or whatever speed it has stated, you should obey that law. When the government says to
pay such-and-such taxes, it means you are to pay those taxes. When the government says you need a license to hunt or fish, you should get a license first before engaging in those activities. When the government says you need to comply with certain building codes or regulations, you need to obey those things. That seems rather simple, right? So, what is the problem here? Why do we oftentimes not obey the civil government?

One reason we are to submit to the government is because government has been ordained by God. Some call it the *divine right of the state*. The passage says that all authority comes from God. This can be a tough pill to swallow, especially when the government is bad or when it makes wrong decisions. Does God allow those things to happen? Yes. There are instances in the Bible where God allowed bad leaders to be in power, such as Jeroboam, Nebuchadnezzar, and Pilate. Jeroboam led the division of the united kingdom of Israel after Rehoboam (Solomon’s son) made an unwise decision. Jeroboam was so bad, he led the people to worship two golden calves and set up separate temples and priests for his people. The interesting part is that this was brought about by the Lord (1 Kings 12:15). King Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian Empire to capture Jerusalem, destroy the Temple, and exile God’s people to Babylon. However, Scripture tells us that Nebuchadnezzar was God’s instrument through whom God judged His people. According to Jeremiah, he was called God’s servant.

Jeremiah 27:5–6  

>“It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. 

>6 Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him.”

God shows the extent of His power in that even the “beasts” would serve the king of Babylon. Clearly, God allows certain people to have power and to lead who are not all that good or even faithful to Him. God delegates power to whomever He wishes in order to accomplish His purposes. Consider Pilate, who had authority to kill Jesus, and yet Jesus said to him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:10–11) God gave Pilate the power to execute His only begotten Son, and this was to accomplish God’s purpose of salvation for the whole world. Remember that Paul was writing to people who were living under a government that ultimately beheaded him. Paul was executed by a tyrannical Roman government. Some of the Christians to whom Paul was writing paid with their lives to live out their faith by being made to fight the gladiators or being thrown to lions.

This is a difficult concept, especially when we live in a world that seems to be run by godless leaders who have no intention of serving God. Just because God allowed for evil government or leaders to be in power, does not mean He approves their actions. I am sure God was furious at the injustices of the Roman government, of Hitler, of Stalin and others. However, government, even bad government, may very well be the servants of God, just as Jeroboam, Nebuchadnezzar, and Pilate. Sometimes God gives good authorities as a blessing, and sometimes He gives bad rulers for some other purpose.

Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
Are you defying God by not submitting to the government? Are you disobeying Him in order to do what you want to do? If so, that is pride and that is sin.

**God Gives Government for Our Good**

Does the government seem good to you? Do you think of it as a good thing? This passage tells us that God gives us civil authority for our good. Civil government in general is a great blessing from God for which we should be thankful. Augustine believed that government is a necessary evil. Not that in and of itself government is evil, but government is made necessary by evil. If we did not live in a fallen world and were not by nature sinful and enemies of God, there would be no need for civil government. Without civil government there would be anarchy where everyone does what is right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6, 21:25) and where evil runs rampant. There would be mob rule. Totalitarian governments usually arise from mob rule gone astray, where the people give up their freedom for security. When anarchy and mob rule are present, even bad government might seem good. Thus, God has instituted government for our good.

*Romans 13:3-4*  
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.

Paul called the civil government several things in this passage: a servant of God, an avenger of God, a minister of God. God gives us government for our good. Next time you pay your income taxes, think of the IRS as a minister of God. No one really thinks of the IRS that way, or the government in general, but this passage says the government is a servant of God. It does the will of God and we ought to be thankful for that. No one really objects to receiving benefits and privileges from the government. When the government builds better highways, like the bypass in Rolesville, NC, people are generally happy about it. When the government provides services that help us, we should be grateful. People are generally thankful for having the police catch criminals and courts putting them in prison. This punishes bad behavior and protects the rest of society. These are good things and we ought to be thankful to God for it.

It follows that the one who resists authority is resisting what God has ordained. Those who act in this manner will bring judgment upon themselves. Christians should obey the civil authorities to avoid God’s wrath (coming through those authorities). In chapter twelve, we read that vengeance never belongs to us. We ought to leave it to God to provide justice, for vengeance belongs to Him and He will repay. God’s wrath, His strong righteous anger that is directed at evil, is for the purpose of just punishment. God hates evil and oftentimes uses the civil authorities, as an avenger of His wrath. Even though Christians must not take personal revenge (Romans 12:17–19), it is the role and responsibility of the civil authorities to punish evil. So, if you have good conduct, you have nothing to fear, but if you break the law, you may experience the wrath of God. If we want to avoid His wrath, we will do good and obey His servant — the government.
Disobeying Government Sometimes Means Obedience to God

The last few verses of this passage remind us of our duty to obey the government, and for no better purpose than to avoid God’s wrath. Paul summed up our duty to being subject to the government in terms of what we owe, namely taxes.

*Romans 13:5-7*  
5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Paul seems to leave no wiggle room for disobeying the government. It is necessary for us to submit to the government and to obey our leaders. Paying taxes is one expression of our submission and respect to the government. Think about the amount of respect you have next time you write a check to the IRS. Christians must not refuse to pay taxes simply because they think some of the money is used unjustly. The Roman Empire surely did not use all of its money for godly purposes, and Paul exhorted his fellow Christians to pay their taxes anyway. Likewise, believers are to honor their leaders and pray for them, even if they are not honorable. It make no difference if our leaders are unbelievers and do not follow Christ. In Paul’s day all those serving as public officials were most likely nonbelievers, and yet, Paul said we must submit to them. The main idea here is that government is for the most part good and we ought to obey it.

However, what do we do when the government opposes God’s word or His will? While God puts government in place, there is a difference between God putting leaders in power and He approving their evil plans. We should remember that our submission to the government is a *general principle* that should be followed, but it has exceptions. For instance, it is illegal for Christians to meet and gather for worship in some places of the world. Some christians have to disobey the government if they are to obey God and meet together as stated in Hebrews 10:24-25. The gospel does not endorse *blind submission* to every thing the government does. In fact, there were times when God raised up leaders to rebel against the government and deliver His people from evil rulers, such as Moses (Exodus 1-12). Several other passages show that God sometimes approves of His people disobedying government, when obeying the civil authorities meant disobeying Him. Consider the following situations.

- Because they “feared God”, The *Hebrew midwives* defied the Pharaoh of Egypt in order to save the baby boys (Exodus 1:17).
- *Esther* defied the king’s edict by coming before him uninvited in order to save her people from the evil Haman (Esther 4:16).
- The *three Hebrew men* were thrown into the fiery furnace for disobeying King Nebuchadnezzar. They told Nebuchadnezzar that whether God would save them or not, they would not serve his gods (Daniel 3:12-18).

Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
• Daniel still prayed to God in open defiance to King Darius’ edict to not pray to anyone except him (Daniel 6:10).

• When the Jewish Sanhedrin told Peter and the apostles to not teach about Jesus, they responded, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:27-29).

So, while God has all authority and He delegates some of His authority to the civil governments, there are times when disobeying our government is the right thing to do. The first principle in this passage is that we ought to obey the government, for in so doing we obey God. Taken by itself with no other scriptural guidance, this principle can be wrongly interpreted to teach blind devotion to the state. The second, and higher principle, is that we must always obey God. Our ultimate allegiance is to God. When there is a conflict between what the government demands and what God says, we must disobey the law. Think of it in terms of what we owe. We owe God perfect allegiance. We do not owe the government perfect submission when it will lead to disobeying God.

A word of caution, though: if I refuse for no just reason to submit to the authority of those over me, whether it is my employer, my parents, my teachers, or my government, ultimately I then participate in lawlessness and I defy God. We have to be very careful when we choose to defy authority, because we could be defying God. We need to realize if obeying man’s law will cause us to disobey God’s law. We have to always choose God over government, if we must choose. That choice, though, may be at the risk of losing our liberty or life. We need to look at our motives. Do we want to disobey the government because we disagree with the speed limit or want to break the law out of convenience? That is not a good reason. We should also ask if our obedience to the law will cause some evil to happen? Will breaking the law save a life? When you are faced with a decision to resist the government because your freedom is being restricted, think about what is more important — personal freedom or personal obedience. No one goes to hell for having their freedoms abridged, but everyone goes to hell for being prideful and resisting God’s authority. Which is the high road here?

Conclusion

In closing, the government is “God’s servant for your good”. It is an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on evil. God gave us government to bring order, to enact justice and to avenge evil. Unwarranted rebellion against government is de facto rebellion against God. However, when the government leads poorly or enacts unjust laws, the people will suffer and evil will prevail. In those times, we must first turn to God, pray for our leaders and for what God would have us do. Ultimately, God is in authority and no power on this earth exists without His permission. We also must trust God to ultimately wipe away all our tears, when there will be no more mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the evil things will have passed away (Revelation 21:4). Be like the psalmist who though he wondered “how long will the wicked triumph,” still declared, “When there is a multitude of worries within me, Your comforts delight my soul” (Psalms 94:3, 19). In times of trouble, when evil prevails, or the government seems to be at odds of what is right, can you sing “It is well with my soul”? This is about trusting God to have the final say. Amen!