

Submission to the Government – Part 1

Romans 13:1

June 16, 2019

Introduction:

The year was 1933. The National Socialist party was on the rise in Germany, led by an outspoken, charismatic leader named Adolph Hitler. This political party, the Nazis, had done much to restore Germany's economy and national pride after the devastating effects of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War. As a result, many German Christians began promoting Nazi ideology in the church, especially regarding their views of the superiority of the Aryan race as opposed to those of Jewish descent.

Yet some resisted this Nazification of the church, forming what became known as the Confessing Church. One of the leaders of this resistance movement was a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He argued that National Socialism was an illegitimate form of government and therefore had to be opposed. In an essay entitled, "The Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer outlined three stages of this opposition. First, the church was called to question state injustice. Secondly, it had an obligation to help all victims of injustice, whether they were Christian or not. And finally, church might be called to "put a spoke in the wheel" to bring the machinery of injustice to a halt. ¹

Years later, as the Confessing Church was driven underground and the atrocities of the Nazis became increasingly evident, Bonhoeffer would choose to become a deadly spoke in the wheel of the Third Reich. Before being arrested for helping Jews escape to Switzerland under the pretense of false papers, he chose to be involved in an assassination plot against Hitler. It did not succeed, and once those responsible were discovered, Hitler ordered their execution. As a result, Bonhoeffer was hanged at the Flossenburg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, along with the other conspirators.

So the question that arises from the incident is, "Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer right to seek to assassinate Adolph Hitler?" and this comes in part because of what the apostle Paul says in our passage we'll be looking at this morning. Our text today, found in Romans 13, addresses the role we have towards the government. So let's keep this question about the legitimacy of Bonhoeffer's role in assassinating Hitler in mind as you open your Bibles to Romans 13. We'll attempt to give an answer to that question later on in the sermon, but for now I would invite you to follow along as I read v. 1-7 of Romans 14, a passage that can be found on pg. 948 of the hardcover pew Bibles.

Please follow along as I read, starting at v. 1, from the ESV. **"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. 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, 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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to**

avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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."

As you can see, there's quite a bit of ground covered in this passage. The question of the Christian's relationship to the government is both a significant and practical one as it's an issue we all have to deal with. Numerous full-length books have been written on this subject and so I can't possibly cover it exhaustively in just one sermon. Nevertheless, today I want to give our attention to the primary demand being made of us in this passage that comes out of v. 1 and then I want to address objections that arise because of it. We'll get back to the passage on a whole over the next two weeks. So then, let's begin by laying out Paul's central point he's making here, which is...

1. We ought to submit to government because it has been established by God

Paul states right at the beginning of the section what he expects of us. Look back at your Bibles at v. 1 once again. Paul writes, **"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."**

The first sentence gives us the main thesis of the passage and it's exhaustive in scope. Paul says that **"every person"** should live in submission to the governing authorities. There aren't any exceptions given. This is true for everyone. Just because you're a Christian doesn't exempt you from this responsibility. Even though Christ is your Lord, that doesn't mean you're aren't responsible to still submit to earthly rulers. This is a universal command, whether you're a Christian or an unbeliever: you are to subject yourself to the governing authorities.

The reason why we should do this is found in the second sentence. It says, **"For** (here's the basis on which this commands rests) **there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."** So all governments or all rulers that exist, whether they're good or bad, are instituted by God. Paul makes it clear there are no exceptions, that no ruler exists apart from God's authority. He states it both positively and negatively. On the negative side he says there's **"no authority"** except that which comes from God. Then on the positive side he says **"those [authorities] that exist,"** whoever they are and wherever they might be, have been instituted by God. Therefore, since God's heavenly authority stands behinds all earthly human government, we all should submit ourselves to the governing authorities.

This is a repeated theme throughout Scripture: that those who rule do so by God's sovereign will. Let's consider a few examples. You don't need to turn to any of these passages, just listen as I mentioned them. When Jesus was before Pontus Pilate, the Roman prefect asked him, *"Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"* Jesus answered him, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above"* (John 19:10-11). Jesus pointedly reminds Pilate that his political authority was given to him by God.

In Jeremiah 27:6, God says this about the Babylonian king who sacked Jerusalem. *“I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant.”* In 1 Kings 12:15, Jeroboam was a wicked king of Israel and yet it says this about him, *“So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word.”* Then in Daniel 2:21 it says that God *“removes kings and sets up kings.”* So then, Scripture speaks with one clear voice on this: all authorities - all kings and rulers and governments – they all derive their authority from God.

Now you might be tempted to try to limit this. You might think, “Surely this passage only applies to good rulers and just governments. It can’t possibly apply to wicked and corrupt rulers, can it?” But the problem with that line of thinking is in the passages I just quoted, all the rulers involved were all men who weren’t good rulers. Pilate sent Jesus to his death. Nebuchadnezzar was a pagan king who conquered the nation of Israel. Jeroboam was condemned as a wicked king over Israel. And let’s not forget that Paul was writing to Christians living in Rome during the time of Emperor Nero, and yet in spite of the many vices of Nero, Paul still instructed them to submit to his authority.

So this command to submit to governing authorities isn’t couched in terms that allow you to take a pass on it if your government is corrupt or the ruler over you is wicked. Nor do you get out of it because you’re a Christian. The passage is comprehensive in its scope: **“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.”**

Having said that, the next thing we must do is deal with the 800-pound gorilla in the room whenever Romans 13 is taught. You don’t live in the West after the time of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust and not deal with the question of what this passage is saying to those who lived under Hitler’s rule. We hear what Paul says in Romans 13 and immediately our minds go to the worst case-scenario we can think of. We bristle at the thought of submitting to a government like Nazi Germany in the 1930’s and 40’s and so we wonder if Paul really means for us to be subject to a government so corrupt and to a man so evil that he was hell-bent on wiping out an entire race of people?

Therefore, before we can go any further into the passage, we need to address this issue because anything else I say will be over-shadowed by this question until it is adequately dealt with. So the rest of our time this morning is going to seek to do just that. Is this command in Romans 13:1 absolute? Are there no exceptions whatsoever? Is there no place for civil disobedience? What are we to do when faced with being told to do one thing by God and another thing by the government? So then, in our second point this morning, I want to wrestle with these questions because they’re important for us to think through, especially after the events of the Second World War. So for our second point, we need to address the questions...

2. Is this an absolute demand? Is civil disobedience ever permissible?

Now let me begin by giving you a simple, straightforward answer to these questions and then I will explain and attempt to demonstrate to you why this is the case. So to the first

question, "Is this an absolute demand, such that we need to obey it no matter what the governing authorities command us to do?" the answer is, "No, it's not an absolute demand. There are times when we ought not submit to the governing authorities." And that then means the second question, "Is civil disobedience ever permissible?" can be answered with, "Yes, at times, civil disobedience to the government may be necessary." Now saying that doesn't make it so, and so I need to prove to you how other examples in Scripture help us recognize that we must not take what Paul is saying here in an absolute, no exceptions-whatsoever sense.

So let's consider some biblical examples of where submission to governing authorities and submission to God came into conflict. First, there's the situation in the first chapter of Exodus where the Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys but let the baby girls to live. The midwives refused to obey and instead allowed both the boys and girls to live.

Then there are a couple of well-known acts of civil disobedience in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar erects a golden statue and demands that everyone bow down and worship it. But three young Jewish men by the name of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to do so. As a result of their defiance to Nebuchadnezzar's decree, they're thrown into a blazing furnace as punishment, but God rescues them by not allowing any of them to be burned.

Then a little later in the sixth chapter of Daniel, a decree is made that anyone caught praying to someone other than the king would be punished. So in response, this is what he does, "*When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; and he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.*" As a result of this disobedience to the king, Daniel is arrested and thrown into a pit of lions, and yet God preserves his life.

Then in the New Testament, we have the situation in Acts 4 where Peter and John were arrested, called before the Jewish leaders, and commanded to cease proclaiming the name of Jesus. In response, they said this, "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*" In spite of the demands of the governing authorities, the apostles continued to proclaim the gospel.

So we have numerous examples in the Bible of ruling authorities demanding one thing while the people of God refused to submit to it, and yet God was pleased with their civil disobedience. Those examples demonstrates that what Paul is saying here in Romans 13 isn't an absolute command that must always be obeyed no matter what. But besides these examples, I think we need to recall what Jesus said about our relationship to the governing authorities. In Matthew 22, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees regarding paying taxes. After asking them whose image was on the coin needed to pay the tax, Jesus makes this statement. He says, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*"

This statement by Jesus is profoundly important to keep in mind when thinking through Romans 13. There are things which belong to Caesar, to the governing authorities, that we ought to submit to. That's the affirmation of Romans 13: we must submit to the governing authorities. So we're to pay taxes and obey the laws and give honor and submission to those who rule over us, because they have been established by God.

But when Jesus says we must render to God the things that are God's, he's reminding us that obedience to Caesar isn't absolute. Submission to God is more important than submission to Caesar. Often time there's no conflict between the two. But when there is conflict, when the government demands you do something that goes against God's authority, or forbids you from obeying God's command, then obedience to God must supersede obedience to the State. Thus in all of those examples of the Hebrew midwives, of Daniel, of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and of the apostles, they were rightfully obeying God instead of the ruling authorities because the government was demanding they disobey God. It is to God alone that we owe absolute obedience, so if rulers are demanding we break God's law in order to obey their laws, we must obey God and disobey the ruling authorities.

So then, in most situations we ought to do exactly what Paul says here in Romans 13 and be subject the governing authorities. But there may come times when we shouldn't. Now certainly that is true when the government demands we disobey God, but it can also be true when we face conflicting ethical demands. For example, let's say you're walking in a neighborhood where a home has a "No trespassing" sign posted. In obedience to the law, you ought not trespass on that person's property. But let's say you hear a child yelling for help from the backyard swimming pool, as he's desperately trying to stay afloat. Does this mean you should keep walking and not rescue the child, because after all, there is a "No trespassing" sign and you need to obey the law? No, of course not. You ought to violate the no trespassing law and run onto the property to save the drowning child. No trespassing laws are good laws and should be obeyed. But not absolutely. There may be situations where the right thing to do is disobey the law because a greater concern is present: in this case, it's more important to save a life by disobeying the governing authorities than to obey and allow the child to drown.

So let's talk about some historical examples, starting with the Civil Rights movement. The government was demanding that African-Americans be treated unjustly, through segregation and unfair voting laws. Martin Luther King Jr. and others recognized that this was unjust and began to engage of acts of civil disobedience. I think those acts of disobedience to the law were justified because the government was demanding that schools and workplaces treat people as less than human. They were laws that were oppressing and dehumanizing people who were created in the image of God who we had been called to love, and therefore it was right to refuse to obey them.

Now let's go back to the question of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his involvement in an assassination attempt on Hitler. Admittedly, this is a much more difficult case, seeing how Bonhoeffer wasn't involved in mere passive disobedience, such as was often the case in the Civil Rights Movement. Bonhoeffer was actively choosing to kill the leader of Germany by assassination. He was refusing to submit to the governing authorities by

seeking to kill the head of the government, thus breaking the fifth commandment, “You shall not kill.” So was he justified in doing so? Now there is much disagreement about the morality of this choice; in fact, Bonhoeffer himself struggled deeply with it and did not advocate this as a choice anyone should make, but rather it was upon him alone and he would have to answer to God for it. So it’s not an easy situation to judge, so if you disagree with my assessment of it, I can understand why.

Nevertheless, I believe Bonhoeffer’s actions were justified. I believe it was right to disobey the governing authorities by attempting to assassinate Hitler because what the Nazi government was doing was so heinously evil in seeking to exterminate the entire Jewish race that stopping it by killing Hitler and thus ending the War and the Holocaust and saving countless lives justified his actions. Just as it is acceptable to break a no trespassing law in order to save the life of a drowning child, so also, I believe, it was acceptable to violate the fifth commandment in order to save the lives of millions.

Much the same thinking was made when considering dropping the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. President Harry Truman knew full well that by doing so thousands of innocent people would die. But he also realized if he didn’t, the War would likely drag on for many years, with countless more dying as the Allies would likely have to invade Japan. The reasoning is the same in both instances, the only real difference is that President Truman acted as a governmental official and Bonhoeffer as a private citizen. But both were acting on an ethical principle that when a far greater good is at stake, disobedience to a law may be justified.

Now I think it needs to be said Bonhoeffer’s situation was extremely rare where the evil being committed was especially egregious. Most political situations are not like that, especially in our country. For example, Barack Obama was a Democratic president who supported the legality of abortion. While I strongly disagree with that view, he was not demanding that anyone get an abortion, nor would killing him suddenly overturn *Roe v. Wade*. While I disliked many of his policies, Obama wasn’t doing anything so heinously evil or demanding we disobey God such that it warranted assassinating him. While some people strongly disagreed with him, all were obligated to submit to him and follow the laws that came out of his administration.

The same thing holds true with President Trump. Although we’ve had many insist, he’s “Not My President,” he is. Trump has been established by God to be in the position of power he is in right now and we are to obey Romans 13 when it comes to him. You may disagree with his policies on immigration or who he appoints to be on the Supreme Court, but he’s not doing anything that demands you kill an innocent person or disobey God. Thus, there is no place for an assassination attempt on him or any other elected official. You can protest if you want – our country allows for that – but attempting to kill him is categorically out of line. We are to submit to the governing authorities provided they’re not demanding we directly disobey God.

The way we deal with governmental officials we find problematic is by electing them out of office. Our system of government allows for us to remove people we don’t like by means of the ballot box. That is a legitimate way of submitting to government and yet

deals with rulers we don't like. Voting is an opportunity afforded to us by living a democracy, which was not available to the Romans. So if you don't like Trump, fine. Submit to him because he has been established by God to serve in this role right now and then vote against him in 2020. And if in 2020 Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders or someone else you don't care an onion happens to win, then you need to submit to him or her because that person will have been established by God. And unless they're directly demanding you do something in disobedience to God, you are to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, even if you don't personally like it.

But let me add one more thing here regarding submitting to the government and civil disobedience. One can be submissive to the governing authorities while still practicing civil disobedience by being willing to accept the punishment that comes from the disobedience. For example, in the examples in Daniel, they all were willing to suffer the punishment that came from their actions. So also in Acts the apostles suffered beatings as a result of their civil disobedience. Then during the Civil Right Movement, protestors willingly went to jail for their crimes of violating segregations laws. So one can do both: practice civil disobedience when necessary and also submit to the governing authorities by enduring the punishment that results from your actions.

Conclusion

So then, hopefully that addresses the elephant in the room regarding this passage. I have a lot more to say about it, which we'll get to next week, but for now it's important that we lay the groundwork by dealing with the pressing objection we all feel when reading Romans 13. The rule is true: we're to submit to the governing authorities because they've been instituted by God. The vast majority of time this is the case, regardless of whether it's Trump or Obama or Clinton or Bush. They are in the position they are by the sovereign will of God and we therefore ought to be subject to them.

But there are exceptions. The government is an authority, but it's not the absolute authority. God is. And so when earthly rulers overstep their bounds, when they demand we engage in something that disobeys God or forbids us from practicing something we're called to do in obedience to God, then civil disobedience is necessary. Nevertheless, we can still show our recognition to the authority of the government by willingly suffering the penalty that comes with our act of disobedience. This is the manner that God's people have acted in the past when faced with the conflict between obeying God and obeying Caesar, and it must be true of us as well, in those rare and exceptional times when we're faced with such a choice. May God give us the wisdom and courage to both submit the governing authorities daily and to submit to God rather than man when forced to choose. Let's pray.

Endnotes

1. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/dietrich-bonhoeffer>

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