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Romans 13:1-7

**SUBMIT: THAT DOESN'T SOUND VERY AMERICAN,  
BUT IT'S GOD'S WILL**

A sermon on Romans 13 can be a little like tiptoeing through a minefield during times of extreme political tensions. Everyone has their own opinion of the way things ought to be. Say one thing the wrong way and you ignite hostilities. I think the only topic more sensitive is money. But God the Holy Spirit has given us His Holy Word for our instruction -not to further a certain agenda or to get us to vote a certain way, but to shape our thinking and our attitude toward earthly governments because our attitude about such things is not merely a secular, academic, patriotic or social exercise. Our attitude toward government stems from our relationship with God Himself.

One word comes through powerfully in the Holy Spirit's message on government: submit. Yet even

just that one word can raise the eyebrows of a red-blooded American. The word “submit” is not part of our American vocabulary. From our worldview it’s loaded with negative baggage. But for a minute let’s remove ourselves from our own cultural context and seek to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit’s choice of word.

The word “submit” here in Romans 13 means to align yourself under the range of someone’s authority. It can’t be a negative word because Jesus our Savior submitted Himself to His heavenly Father. That doesn’t mean Jesus is less important than His heavenly Father. He is and always was just as powerful, just as infinite, just as wise, just as eternal and just as glorious as His heavenly Father. But He willingly arranged Himself under His heavenly Father’s will, desire and authority while He walked the earth. Remember His famous prayer to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane: *Not my will but yours be done.*

When we submit to governing authorities, we are also submitting to our heavenly Father. Romans 13 says, *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. Any government can only stand so long as God holds it up. The form of government is not specified. It could be a kingship, a dictatorship, a communist regime, tribal rule or a democratic republic.*

Now here we need to be careful. We should not look to the government as though it *is* God, as though if we only had the right form of government or the right people, then we could create a heaven on earth. We are not to put our faith government for Scripture says, *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.* Nor has God ordained that all things should go to the government and come from the government. A governing authority is only God's representative and as such God has set up the parameters of its responsibility. Romans 13 says, *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.*

In other words, the primary responsibility God has given to government is to provide law and order by punishing evil and rewarding good. This includes capital punishment. Providing law and order is how God intends to bless us through government.

For this reason, submitting to governing authorities is not merely a civil but a moral issue. That's why Romans 13 states: *Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.* If we refuse to submit to our governing authorities, it is the same as refusing to submit to God. And not only might we be punished then by the civil government, but we will also fall under God's damning judgment. Romans 13 decrees: *Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*

Only when someone in authority commands us to believe or do something that goes against what God says in His Word, only then does Scripture say we are to respectfully disobey.

All this would seem to be a lot more cut and dried if we were ruled by a king. What makes the application of this Bible truth particularly murky for American Christians is that we are a nation governed by the people for the people. Therefore we need to be all the more vigilant as we navigate our way. We need continually to be asking what's in our hearts? Is it rebellion?

One of our founding documents states: "But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." With that understanding our universities teach that it is our patriotic duty to test the laws and challenge the authorities. Some even suggest it is OK to defy and protest when we perceive abuse of power. We are guaranteed the right to dissent and the freedom to express it. Muddying the waters more is the reality that humans are sinful -naturally corrupt. In this sin-corrupted world governments will -not might, will -misuse and abuse power in ways that make us suffer.

Does that give us the right no longer to submit? It doesn't. Whereas we might seek legal recourse to defend the rights of others or even our own rights, the Bible teaches that we should be willing patiently to suffer injustice and burdens to ourselves. In fact, Scripture says we are most blessed when we suffer injustice quietly and patiently for Jesus' sake.

But we find that intolerable, don't we? Our own human hearts have found it impossible to submit to authority ever since Adam and Eve first thumbed their nose at God and ate the forbidden fruit. When we were two we screamed our defiance when Mom said, "No you can't have the TV remote." We were sullen 16-year-olds with a 10:00 curfew. Even now people universally treat the highway speed limit with such disdain as though it didn't even exist. And if the officer stops us, he's the jerk. In our hearts we often harbor such rage, such hatred, such suspicion not particularly for the cruelty of our elected officials but sometimes just for their difference of opinion.

You and I have already lost our place in heaven because we have hearts that refuse to submit. And as we persist in defiance, disrespect or disobedience we dig our hole even deeper into hell.

It's not a matter we can just change either. Our hearts are inherently defiant. We need a savior who can redeem us, redeem us entirely, redeem us even from our corrupt, rebellious hearts. That's what Jesus did. Jesus did not have a sinful heart. Therefore He submitted. He paid taxes. He even submitted when His heavenly Father said, "Now you must die." He submitted to the unjust trial before the Sanhedrin. He submitted to Governor Pontius Pilate's unspeakable cruelties. Though He was completely innocent and all this was entirely unfair, He submitted to the sentence of execution on a cross. He submitted to the ultimate horror of being abandoned by His Father there. But even in that darkest hour when the sun stopped shining, Jesus still cried out, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" He showed perfect submission to the very last.

By so doing, Jesus redeemed you and me. With His perfect submission at the cost of His life He ransomed you and me out from God's judgement. You and I are forgiven. For Jesus' sake God has removed our guilt and has erased from His memory any hint of the rebellion in our hearts. God has declared us clean, justified, and holy. Because Jesus submitted you and I are declared citizens of heaven.

In view of what our Savior has done for us, will we persist in disdain or resentment for those whom God has set up in power to govern us? Rather, let God's mercy, Christ's sacrifice and the Spirit's peace breathe in you a new heart of faith, forbearance, and composure. Let us be ready to recognize that through the institution of government God intends to bless us in ways we might not easily perceive. For the love of Jesus and to for His honor let us have a spirit always willing to submit.

Therefore, if we owe taxes, then let us pay taxes; *if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, the honor.*