

A Gospel Response to Government

Romans 13:1-7

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Well, I invite you to take your Bible with me this morning and turn to Romans 13. You know I would like to tell you that six years ago when I began our study in the book of Romans I sat down before hand and planned out and said, “You know there’s going to be a pandemic in 2020 and if I lay out my studies just right, then we will be covering Romans 13 and the response to government just when all of us are wondering about the guidelines and how we should respond to government and so forth”. I didn’t do that; I couldn’t have arranged that but obviously the Lord did. So here we find ourselves in a very appropriate text for the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

But as we begin our study of Romans 13, I really do not want you to think about the U.S. and the current political environment that has really fractured the nation. Instead I want to begin for just a moment by creating a country in your imagination. Imagine with me if you would, that you live in a country where the politicians all come from only wealthy families and the current leader of the nation is really, really young, he has no experience, in fact the only thing he has to offer is his family’s pedigree.

He comes to power under questionable circumstances, in fact rumors are circulating that his mother may have very well poisoned his predecessor. Once this young man comes to power, he begins to shred the nation’s laws. He begins by banning capital punishment, he reduces taxes without reducing government expenditures and he begins spending wildly on the arts. As time goes on, we discover that this leader has a dark side. Word spreads that he’s involved with married women and even worse with young boys. As time goes on, we discover that he actually ends up “marrying” his male companion. He flaunts his power by completely ignoring the other positions of state. He is implicated even in plots to murder some of his own citizens, a number of innocent people including, if you can believe it, even his own mother.

It turns out as time unfolds, that he hates the Christian faith. He begins to attack it, he begins to persecute its leaders. He rules for many years essentially dismantling the

country that we have come to know and love, then he is run out of office by those who are tired of his abuses and he ends his young, troubled life by committing suicide.

If you lived in such a place, under such a ruler, how should you respond as a Christian? Well, as perhaps you have already guessed, there was such a country and there was such a ruler. It was Rome and the ruler was Nero. That was the government and that was the leader under which Paul, a Roman citizen, lived and the government and leader under which he wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome. The capital of the empire, the seat of Rome's power, the Washington D.C. of the empire. That is the context of the remarkable words we find in Romans 13.

We find ourselves, just to remind you of the overarching context of this paragraph, in the fourth and final section of the book of Romans. We have looked at him as he has explained the gospel, we have seen him not only explain the gospel but defend the gospel and now we are in the fourth section, the gospel applied. The transforming power of the gospel of grace. Beginning in chapter 12 verse 1 and running through chapter 15 verse 13, Paul ends his letter, except for the very concluding comments, by applying the truth of the gospel that he has explained in very practical ways. Here is how the gospel intersects with everyday life.

Now so far, we have discovered in this last major section, a gospel response to God. That is the message of chapter 12 verses 1 and 2. If you have come to embrace the gospel then God demands, and you owe Him, your body and your mind as a sacrifice. That is the message of those two verses. Then we learn in chapter 12 verses 3 through 8, a gospel response to service. Christ has gifted every believer who follows Him with the capacity to serve in His church and you are called to invest your time and efforts in serving His church using those gifts.

Now in the preliminary outline that I gave you a number of months ago, I broke the rest of chapter 12 into a response to believers and a response to enemies. But as I studied it further and as we saw it unfold together, I have concluded the rest of chapter 12 is really one large section on the priority and expressions of love: both a love for God and a love

for others. So, I have changed the outline that I originally gave you, those of you who are meticulous note takers need to make note of this, and so the rest of chapter 12 beginning in verse 9 through verse 21 is a gospel response to love: how we need to love God and others.

Now today we begin chapter 13 and a new theme. It is a gospel response to government. That is the message of the paragraph that begins in chapter 13 verse 1 and runs through verse 7. If you have come to be a follower of Jesus Christ, if you have embraced the gospel, then here is how the gospel should impact your view of the government around you.

Let's read it together, Romans chapter 13, I will read verses 1 through 7:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Now this is one of those passages where Paul does not leave us wondering what the theme might be, he helps us by directly stating it. Notice the beginning of verse one, here is the theme: every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. This is the gospel response to government.

Now this paragraph has engendered a lot of debate. One of the main questions is, why is it here? In fact those who hate what it teaches have even gone so far as to say, it doesn't fit, it was inserted, it's not even original with Paul. But there is absolutely no manuscript evidence for maintaining that. It is supported by all of the manuscripts that we have; these are the words of the apostle Paul.

So, what is the connection with the surrounding context? Well the likely connection of this paragraph with what comes before, is back in chapter 12 verse 19. There we're told not to take personal vengeance. But here at the beginning of chapter 13, Paul reminds us that the fact that we are not to take personal vengeance doesn't mean that God doesn't care about justice. Even in this world, God is a God of perfect unwavering justice and justice will be done in His presence perfectly one day. But even in this world He cares about justice and He has put in place governing authorities. Instead of personal vengeance, God has brought justice and wrath through governing authorities on those who do evil. Not perfectly, their justice is not like God's, it is very imperfect and flawed. But nevertheless, it is an instrument that God uses.

Now this remarkable paragraph, either directly addresses or indirectly raises some really important questions about crucial issues. Let me just give you the list of what is here or what are the questions that are invited by what is here: You have the issue of the fundamental principle of human authority, you have the various structures of human authority, the different forms of human government, the divine purposes for human government, God's sovereign control of individual government officials, (here is a big one) the relationship between church and state, the validity of capital punishment, the validity and reasons for a just war, our responsibilities and duties to government and the biblical exceptions for submission to government. All of those are either here directly stated or indirectly raised by the content of this paragraph. And you need to know I plan to address all of those as we work our way through this passage together.

Now let me give you a working outline of this paragraph just so you can have a roadmap to see Paul's, the flow of his argument. First of all, you have the very first sentence of verse 1 is a universal command to submit to government. Then beginning with the very

next line in verse 1 and running all the way down through verse 6, you have the reasons to submit to government, and then in verse 7 you have the components or elements or expressions of submission to government. This is what it entails; this is what it looks like. So that is sort of a roadmap of where we are going as we unpack this passage together. And again, just so you know, I do intend to take a few rabbit trails and address the issues that this passage raises along the way.

So, let us begin though where Paul begins and that is with a universal command to submit to government. Notice verse 1, “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.” Now as soon as I read that, I need to admit to you that when it comes to the Christian response to this passage and to government, sadly most Christians tend to end up on one of two extremes. Perhaps you have been tempted to those extremes. I think we all are at one point or other.

One extreme is to focus solely on Romans 13 as the entire Christian response to government. In other words, some take this passage in isolation from the rest of Scripture and imagine that Christians owe a kind of mindless, unlimited obedience to everyone at all levels of government. People like this refuse to speak out against the sins of government, the sins of its officials, they assume there is no legitimate place for disagreement, or petition, or peaceful protest, or at times even disobedience. But that is not what this is teaching. You see we have to interpret this passage consistent with the rest of Scripture. You’ve heard the basic principle of biblical interpretation is, Scripture interprets Scripture. Do you know what that means? It is using the word Scripture in two different ways. The first time it uses it, it is talking about the entirety of Scripture, the second time it uses it, it is talking about an individual passage of Scripture. So, we could rephrase it this way: the entirety of Scripture informs and helps us interpret any specific given passage of Scripture. That is what we have to do as we come to this text as well. This is not all the Bible has to say about our response to government. That is one extreme.

A second extreme when it comes to the response to government, is to focus on the exceptions to Romans 13. Frankly, there are some Christians who spend their time trying

to find new legitimate ways they can disobey the government. For them to obey this passage there almost has to be a truly Christian government with just rulers and laws that only reflect the Scripture. Folks, that is just not the real world. Such a government does not exist in a fallen world and never will. It will not exist until Jesus Christ rules on this planet. These Christians who hold this other extreme are often suspicious. They are suspicious of every official, of every law, they are quickly combative, they are consistently critical in what they say and write and post, and some even become mean spirited and belligerent even encouraging rebellion and revolution. How do you know if you are tempted in this direction? Just look at the bulk of what you spend your time reading and following about this issue. Look at what you “Like” most often, look at what you post or re-post most often. If the majority of that is about the exceptions to what you are commanded to do in Scripture here in Romans 13, then it is out of balance. You are in this extreme. The focus of your response to government needs to be Romans 13 and those places where you learn that you are to submit, to pray for your leaders, to pay your taxes, to respect and honor those in positions of authority.

So those are the two extremes and as we consider those extremes, I want to begin where I often do by helping us understand what this passage does not teach. And so, I do not want to begin with the passage itself, I want to begin with the biblical exceptions to Romans 13.

You see Romans 13 is not all the Bible has to say about government and our response to it. There are biblical exceptions to the requirement here to submit to government. There are biblical grounds to disobey our governmental leaders. You say, “Well Tom why do you want to begin there, why not just walk through the text?” I want to begin here this morning for two reasons, because of those two extremes. I want to begin here because there are some Christians who read Romans 13 and conclude that we owe our government unlimited obedience. And that is simply not true, and you need to know that.

The second reason I want to begin here and start with the exceptions, is that some are going to find it hard to hear what Paul actually says here if I don’t start with the exceptions. Because I know what is going to happen. They are going to be sitting there

going, “Yea Tom, I know it says that, but what about, and what about, and what about?” So, let’s get the “what abouts” off the table so we can then look at what Paul actually says here with an open mind and hearts, alright?

So, let’s look then and consider the biblical exceptions. What are the exceptions to submission to government? What are the biblical grounds for disobeying government? What are the primary legitimate ways for us to respond to governmental abuses?

Now we live in a fallen world and while, as we’ll see, government is established by God and God uses it for His own purposes, government is far from perfect. In fact it is terribly flawed at its best and therefore, there are and will be abuses. How do we respond to that? This list, by the way, that I am going to give you may not be totally comprehensive, but it does include the primary exceptions to Romans 13.

Let’s begin by looking at the legitimate response by individuals to government abuses. Now we are talking about you as an individual Christian. Ok, I am going to look at a different category in a minute, but we are talking about you as an individual Christian. What does the Bible say about how you can respond when the government abuses its authority? Let’s look at them, I’m going to give you a little list here.

First of all, it is ok for you as an individual Christian to acknowledge and to graciously speak against the sins and legal abuse of our leaders. There are countless examples of this in the Old Testament. Of course the Old Testament prophets, as part of the government, assigned by God the responsibility to keep the kings accountable from abusing their authority. They are always speaking this way toward the kings. One good example is Daniel 5:22-23. You remember Daniel, the aging prophet, is called in before Belshazzar the night of the handwriting on the wall to interpret what the writing means. What does Daniel say to Belshazzar? He says:

You, his son, Belshazzar, [*even though you know what happened to your grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, you*] have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, but you have exalted yourself against the God of heaven; ... you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone,

which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified.

Daniel said it respectfully, but he said it directly. He spoke the truth and we must as well. In Matthew 23, our Lord does, you remember, with the scribes and Pharisees. There is an entire chapter there where he pronounces woes on the scribes and Pharisees. You say, “Yea Tom, but they were not only political leaders, they were religious leaders.” That’s true. So, let’s look at John the Baptist, in Mark 6:18, “John had been saying to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’” So here is John the Baptist, speaking out against the sin of someone in Roman government and authority. It is not lawful, it is not permitted, you are breaking the law, it is morally wrong. It is ok for you, believer, to acknowledge in your own heart and even to graciously speak against the sins and legal abuse of leaders.

Secondly, it is ok for you to request a personal exception from an odious law. Daniel does this in Daniel 1. You remember, he has been taken from his homeland, he is now thrust into the court of Nebuchadnezzar. And there he is told that he has to eat food that he was, as a Jewish young man, not permitted to eat. So in Daniel 1:8, Daniel “made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king’s choice food, or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.” He asked, essentially it is kind of a petition of sorts, “I cannot do that, I am petitioning you in this way.” And so, the question is, what would Daniel have done if he had not been granted that petition? I think that answer becomes clear later in Daniel and we will see it in a minute. But he asked for a personal exception from the law and so can you.

Thirdly, and this is a big one, you can use all legal means of redress provided by the existing laws of our country. That means, let me give you a little sub list in terms of what are some of those legal means. First of all, you can lawfully protest unjust or illegal treatment and insist that the country’s laws be followed. On what authority do I tell you that? How about the authority of Jesus and the apostle Paul. Let’s start with Jesus. In John 18 he is appearing before Annas. A preliminary hearing, you remember, on the

night of his arrest. Somewhere in the wee hours of the morning he had a preliminary hearing before Annas, the former high priest and member of the Sanhedrin. And in that hearing Annas essentially tried to get Jesus to incriminate Himself. He asked Him to testify about Himself and to present self-incriminating facts. Here was Jesus' response, this is John 18:21-23:

“Why do you question Me? [now sometimes you can read that and think Jesus is saying ‘Don’t ask me; ask others.’ No, he is saying more than that. He is saying this is illegal, what you are doing is a breach of Jewish law, you are not to ask someone who is being condemned of a crime to incriminate himself. Instead] Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; [you are supposed to be asking witnesses, not me] they know what I said.” When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, “Is that the way You answer the high priest?” Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike me?”

Again, Jesus is saying that is illegal under Jewish law. You don't strike a man who is uncondemned, that is wrong. If I said something wrong, tell me what it was. But either way you don't have the legal right to strike me. That is what Jesus was saying. He was appealing to existing law.

Paul does the same thing on several occasions. You remember in Acts 16 when he was unjustly arrested and beaten in Philippi, and you remember he spent the night in jail chained up. And he and Silas are singing; there is an earthquake; they are set free; the Philippian jailer comes to faith in Christ. Well the next morning the authorities hear about all of this and they hear a little more about Paul and they want to kind of just sweep this thing under the rug, that they have acted illegally. Paul is having none of it. This is Acts 16:37: “Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? [*I don't think so*]... let them come themselves and bring us out.’” Now Paul isn't just being belligerent here, all he is doing is insisting that the law be followed. The law had been breached. This was illegal, and he wants to call attention to it. Why? He wants to call

attention to it for the sake of those new believers in Philippi so they will not be mistreated. He is protecting them. But nevertheless he uses and appeals to the law. The same thing happened when he was unlawfully threatened with punishment, contrary to Roman law. You remember when that whole debacle happened at the temple when he returned to Jerusalem in the book of Acts. In Acts 22:25, because of all that had happened, “they stretched [Paul] out with thongs, [*in other words, they are tying him up to beat him and*] Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, ‘Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?’” Paul is saying this is illegal; what you are doing here is illegal, it is not lawful, it is not right. He appealed to the law. The same thing happened at a hearing before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23. He was unlawfully struck at that hearing and in Acts 23:3 Paul said to the one who had been instructed that he be hit, “...do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?” He says you are acting like you are trying to keep the Law but in reality, you just broke the Law yourself by ordering me to be struck contrary to Jewish Law. I haven’t been condemned. You have no right to do this. So Paul used the law.

It is ok, Christian, on the authority of Jesus and the apostle Paul, for you to lawfully protest unjust or illegal treatment and insist that the law be followed. Part of using the legal means that are available to you includes the use of the judicial system, the use of the judicial system to pursue justice and the following of the countries laws. Paul did this as well. In Acts 25, you remember he is standing before a Roman court and, in an effort to sort of just get rid of the problem, he is told, “Listen we are just going to hand you over to the Jewish authorities and they will sort this out.” Paul, says, no that is not right. This is Acts 25:10-11:

Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. [*I’m a Roman.*] I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you also very well know. If then [*so he says, listen you know this is unjust. If then*] I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me to them. I appeal to Caesar.”

He was saying, listen I am going to use the judicial system in order to seek justice. It is ok for us to do the same, to use the judicial system to pursue justice.

In our system, unlike the Roman system, we can add a couple more to this. We can use the legislature to change the laws of the country, and we can use the voting box to replace politicians responsible for unjust or illegitimate laws. So, we can use the existing laws of the land; that is acceptable.

Let me move on to a fourth response for individuals to governmental abuses. That is we can flee unlawful and unjust arrest and punishment. That is acceptable for believers to do. Jesus told His disciples to do this in Matthew 10:23. He said, “Whenever they [*that is the religious authorities of the town, specifically the synagogue; whenever they*] persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes.” He is saying, listen you have a right to flee from unjust, illegal, arrest, and punishment. Jesus Himself did that, you remember in John 11. After the raising of Lazarus they decided they were going to kill Jesus. This is what we read in John 11:53-54,

From that day on they planned together to kill him. Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with His disciples.

He fled the threat of death, He knew the authorities had commanded that He be turned over and yet He did not allow that to happen, He went into hiding because the time was not right. But He would not be subject to unlawful and unjust arrest and punishment. The apostle Paul did the same thing in Acts 9:23-25. It says:

When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

It is ok for Christians to flee unlawful and unjust arrest and punishment.

Number five, and this is the one you expected, and I have gotten there: disobey the government only when they require you to break God's law. Now this isn't something that is doubtful, it's not questionable. We are talking chapter and verse. Like you can show me in your Bible where it says God forbids that or commands that. And you are required to do so with the right spirit and with a willingness to patiently suffer the consequences of your disobedience just as Jesus did, committing Himself to Him who judges righteously. When He was reviled, He reviled not again, but committed Himself to the Righteous Judge.

You know these texts but turn there with me. Acts 4:18 says that the Sanhedrin summoned the disciples, the apostles, together and "they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." So here is a government command that is in direct contradiction to the command that Jesus had given to them explicitly. How did they respond? Verse 19, "Peter and John answered and said to them, '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 about what we have seen and heard.'" Now just in case that wasn't clear enough, let's look at chapter 5. Of course they went out and kept on preaching and so in chapter 5 verse 28 they bring them back, the council does, and the high priest says to them listen, this is chapter 5 verse 28: "'We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name ... yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'"

Listen, if government at any level commands you to do what God forbids or forbids you to do what God commands, then you must obey God rather than men. You are to do so with the right spirit, and you are to do so with respectful speech. But disobey you must.

There are, of course, many examples in Scripture. Let me give you a couple. There is Exodus 1, you remember the Jewish midwives. Exodus 1:16-17. Pharaoh said, "'When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.' But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let

the boys live.” If they had put those boys to death it would have been a breach of the law of God. They had to obey God rather than man.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in Daniel 3, you remember, were told by Nebuchadnezzar to bow down and worship in front of the golden image that he had built. In Daniel 3:18 they said “...‘let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.’” And of course, Daniel himself in Daniel 6:10. You remember the story how those who resented him and his leadership conspired together and convinced King Darius that he should pass a law that all prayers for the next period of time should be prayed through him as the intermediary—to him and ultimately through him—to the gods and he went along with it, flattered by it. And Daniel 6:10 says: “...when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.” Believer, it is perfectly legitimate for you to disobey the government, if the government is asking you to do what God forbids or forbidding you from doing what God commands.

Now do you notice, those are the exceptions given to individuals. I think because we live in what has now become a democracy we are tempted to think our authority goes beyond that. I can’t tell you how many times I hear Christians say, “Well, I’m not going to do that because it’s unconstitutional.” Well, God didn’t give you the authority to decide whether that law is constitutional. Neither does our constitution, by the way. It gives the Supreme Court that authority. Ultimately the only right you have is, if the Supreme Court comes down on it and it is contrary to God’s law, then you can disobey it. But if you don’t like it then you just have to lump it and move on. Just because we live in what has now become a democracy doesn’t mean that God has given you as an individual authority over those in authority. And when you carry out these exceptions, they have to be done without sinning in your speech or in your attitude. If you want to know how to do this, read Daniel. What a classic example of a guy who knew how to do this in a way that still honored God in his demeanor.

So real quickly, let's look at a second category: the legitimate response by subordinate authorities in government to government abuses. So now I am talking about those who are in authority at some level in government. Not the President, but somewhere down the chain. They have duties as well, beyond our individual duties. The reformers and the Puritans used to refer to these as the lesser magistrates. That is, they have authority, God-given authority, as we will learn in Romans 13, but it is not the highest authority. But I believe that these lesser magistrates, these lower government officials, have responsibilities beyond that that you and I have as individual citizens. Because they have been placed by God, ultimately, again as Romans 13 tells us, into positions of human authority in government. And therefore, they serve as ministers of God. So, if you serve in government in any capacity, all the way up through, then these are how you ought to respond when there are governmental abuses.

First of all, obviously, you can use all the means available to individuals. You are still an individual, so you can use all of those we just talked about.

In addition, secondly, you can disobey when laws or executive orders will unjustly cause the death of innocents and there are no other means to deal with it. Esther is a great example of this. In Esther 4:15-16, you remember, Esther said to Mordecai, “Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. [And] I and my maidens will also fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, [*listen to this*] which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.” Why would she break the law? Because she was trying to save, from a genocide, she was trying to save the Jewish people. You know what this tells us? This tells us that if you are in a position of authority in the government, you can never take the Nazi defense at the Nuremberg trials, ‘I was just following orders.’

Thirdly, if you are in a subordinate position of authority, you may disobey when the laws or executive orders are contrary to the law of the land. Not just contrary to God's law but contrary to the law of the land. Why? Because those in lower positions of authority have either taken an actual or implied oath to uphold the law of the land, to do justice, and to

protect the people they serve. And that takes precedence over an illegal or unjust ruler or law.

Number four: they can resist with force an unlawful, internal, takeover of the government; in other words, a coup. Those in lower positions of authority have, I believe, a compelling responsibility to respond to that and make sure the legitimate government remains in power.

Number five: remove, with force if necessary, any government official seeking to replace the current government and its laws. In other words, if someone comes to power and decides to change the whole system – they are just going to remake it – and in that case those in lower levels of responsibility have a responsibility before God, because of this actual or implied oath to the laws of the land and to its people, to intervene.

Now I know I just kind of went through those quickly, but I just wanted to bring them to your attention. But I want you to look at the two lists I have given you. Biblically those are the exceptions to our required submission to government. But, please be careful. Yes these are exceptions; you can use them. But just like when using a knife you have to be careful not to cut yourself in the process. I did that this week right here on my wrist.

As you think about and weigh the exceptions for submitting to government, make sure that you guard, first of all, your attitude. Yes, those are exceptions. But if your attitude is wrong you are sinning. Titus 3:1-2 (we will look at this in more detail in weeks to come) says, “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, [*this is still talking about our response to those in leadership*] to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration [*or courtesy*] for all men.” If your attitude toward local, state, and federal government officials is not one of honor and respect, you are sinning against God. If, even in pursuing these legitimate exceptions, your speech or your attitude or your posts are characterized by viciousness or constant suspicion and disrespect, you are sinning against those officials and you are sinning ultimately against God Himself, who as we will learn in Romans 13 is behind all human authority. He is more than capable of dealing with rogues.

Also, be careful of your focus. It's interesting that while the Bible contains legitimate exceptions, as we have seen, to the command to submit to government, not one of the three primary New Testament passages about our response to government gives one of those exceptions. It doesn't mean there aren't exceptions, but it does mean that the limited number of exceptions and the relative obscurity of most of them only serve to magnify the rule of submission. And doesn't that make sense? I mean think about this with me. What would you think – really think about this for a moment – what would you think of a Christian wife who spent most of her marriage researching the biblical grounds for not submitting to her husband and the biblical grounds for divorce? What if she talked about those biblical exceptions all the time? What if the websites she read and gravitated to online were about the biblical grounds for not submitting to your husband? What if most of her posts championed her right not to submit and her right to divorce? What is wrong with that? I mean if it's what the Scriptures teaches, she's not technically wrong. So why do we instinctively know that shouldn't happen? Because it is a desperately wrong focus. If she is dominated by the exceptions, then she has missed the entire point of what the Bible teaches about the priority of marriage.

The same thing is true, sadly, about many Christians when it comes to their submission to government. They spend all of their time reading about, thinking about, meditating on, fostering those exceptions; working themselves up. Folks, those are the exceptions, not the rule.

Paul, in Romans 13, focuses guess where? On the biblical rule. Let's look at it together briefly. Look at Romans 13:1, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Every person. Literally in Greek, *every soul*. That is a Hebrew expression which means every single individual without exception. Believer or unbeliever, doesn't matter. Every soul. And then look at the word *authorities*. Just like in English, the word *authority* can be used of the possession of power. Or it can be used of the one who exercises that power or authority, which is how it is used here in the plural.

Some say, "Well, these authorities in verse 1, they are like spiritual authorities – demons and angels." Because this word is used that way in some texts in the New Testament.

Can't be here because in verse 3 he explains what he is talking about: talking about rulers who deal with human beings. So these authorities are rulers who hold positions in government. Josephus uses this word of the Roman authorities in Judea. Now why does he call them the *governing authorities*? The word *governing* simply means *those who are over*. Those who are in a position, over believers to whom he writes, in positions of governmental authority. These are government officials at all levels. It's like 1 Peter 2:13-14, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king [*there's the supreme*] as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him..." In our own political context this passage includes the President, the Executive Branch, Congress, judges, governors, mayors, and policemen, and the whole gamut.

Now notice he does not say only submit to the good and righteous and respectable. And by the way, this doesn't mean, again, that the government should overlook injustice. They should deal with that. We'll talk about that at a later time. But in terms of our response, it doesn't say we are only submit to the good and the righteous and respectable. In fact, John Calvin puts it this way, "We are not only subject to the authority of princes, who perform their office toward us uprightly and faithfully as they ought, but also to the authority of all who perform not a whit of the prince's office. They who rule unjustly and incompetently have been raised up by God to punish the wickedness of the people. A wicked man should be held in the same reverence and esteem by his subjects, insofar as public obedience is concerned, in which they would hold the best of kings if he were given to them."

The Greek word translated *be in subjection* there in verse 1 means *to willingly submit to another, to recognize their authority over you*. It's a military word that is often used in the context of how those who are lower in rank respond to those who are higher in rank. The word itself doesn't mean *to obey* but it's often connected to obedience, as it is even in Titus 3:1.

There are two other New Testament texts that teach this priority: Titus 3:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. We will look at both of those again more in detail in weeks to come.

Look again at chapter 13 verse 1, “Every [soul] is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.” How do you know if that’s true of you? Let me just give you a little test and I challenge you to take this test like I took it this week, ok? If your kids, and if you don’t have kids, imagine for a moment you did, ok? If your kids spoke to you and about you the way you speak to and about the government, would you be happy with their submission to your authority? If your kids had the attitude toward you and your authority that you have toward the government would you say that they are truly biblically submissive? If your kids acted towards you the way you act toward the government, would you say they have a submissive heart toward your authority. If you have to honestly say the answer to those questions is *no*, then understand this: you don’t have a submissive heart toward the government that God Himself established and you are living in a consistent pattern of unrepentant sin.

Let me challenge us all, as we go through this passage together, to ask the Lord to speak to us through His word and challenge us so that we intentionally think like Christians, not like the people around us.

Let’s pray together. Father, thank You for the truth of Your word. Lord give us submissive hearts, speak to us, O Lord, and may we hear and respond. Forgive us for countenancing dishonor and disrespect. Lord, I pray that You would help us to understand the exceptions, to take them when we need to, but to do so with the right spirit, with the right disposition, and still with honor and respect in our hearts. Father, I pray that as we go through this passage You would instruct us, help us to learn, both our sins and to repent and turn from them, and to learn Your intention and purpose behind even the flawed and fallen government under which we live. Thank You that, as inadequate as it is, it is still Your gift to us to protect us from what would happen if there were no government. We thank You for Your blessing. Give us hearts to receive. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.