

Romans
A Gospel Response to Government (Part 3)
Romans 13:1-7
June 21, 2020

Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas

I invite you to take your Bible and turn with me to Romans 13. And as you are turning, I want to share something with you. A couple of weeks ago in our elders meeting Eric Weathers, who is a part of our church and also very much involved in the training academy, The Masters Academy International. Where graduates from the Masters Seminary mostly, go to various places around the world and equip and train indigenous pastors for ministry, teach them how to preach expositionally, how to serve their flock. He is very much involved in that and he brought us a gift from the ministry in Europe, specifically, in Germany. A dear friend of mine heads that ministry, Christian Andreason. And a number of, I guess, a couple of years ago now, I don't remember exactly. Was it a year ago that we looked at partnering with them for the translation of this? [*a voice from the congregation, a year and a half ago*] A year and a half ago, see I'm terrible with time. But a year and a half ago the elders agreed that we wanted to support the translation of the MacArthur and Mayhue systematic theology into German. There are a number of systematic theologies available there in Germany. But most of them are liberal and those that aren't are not really usable for the average pastor. And so, they really wanted this work to be available there. It has now been translated and printed and Christian sent us, via Eric, a copy in leather of the systematic theology. As you can see you almost need like a wheelbarrow to carry it. But it's all there and it's very well done. It's, I have just enough German to be dangerous and I am grateful for the fact that the Lord allowed us as a church to partner with the ministry there to see a good systematic theology put in the hands of pastors, church leaders, and even lay people in Germany and everywhere German is spoken. So, I just wanted you to be aware of that. And to celebrate with us the completion of that in German. It will be around somewhere, not after the service probably, but we'll display it somewhere on campus so you will get a chance to see it. But I wanted you to be aware of that. And thanks Eric for bringing that to us.

Well, let's again, turn to Romans 13 and continue our study of this wonderful and very appropriate chapter. I think you understand that when you look at biblical history, the

darkest time in Israel's history was about a 300-year span that was the period of the Judges. That period was described for us in the Book of Judges as well as in the Book of Ruth. There was no central government in Israel. There was no national leader. Each tribe had its own de facto government. They were often at war with each other. And often they were at war within their own tribe. It was a time of widespread apostasy, of great degeneracy, morally, as well as recurring and deepening cycles of divine judgment. And the chief characteristic of that period is described in several places in the Book of Judges. One of those is Judges 17:6, where we read this "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did [*did what*] what was right in his own eyes." What you and I have to understand is that left to ourselves without the restraint of human government, this entire planet would look like the period of the Judges. In Romans 13 Paul is explaining to us that government, even bad government, is better than no government. The radicals in our country who are advocating anarchy and the destruction of authority, frankly they need to get out a little more. They need to read history. They need to just look around our world at those countries where there is little or no government and ask themselves if that is really what they want.

The truth is, and this is what we are learning in Romans 13, is government is God's gracious way of protecting us from a world and from a society in which man's fallenness is given free reign. This is part of the gospel's response to government that we are learning. In Romans 13:1-7, that's really the theme of this paragraph, it is a reminder that for those of us who have been justified, for those of us who have embraced the gospel who have been transformed by the work of the spirit, we respond to government in the way that God would want us to. In the way that Christ wants us to. It is a gospel response to government. It's described here in these seven verses, let's read them again together Romans 13:1-7:

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.

This paragraph begins in the very first sentence with a universal command to submit to government. In fact, the first sentence states the theme of this paragraph. Notice verse 1, "Every person, [*literally in Greek, every soul, every human being without exception*] is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." The Greek word translated "be in subjection" means "to willingly submit to another," to recognize their authority over you. There is the universal command. Now beginning after that sentence and running all the way down through verse 6 Paul provides for us the reasons that we are to submit to government. You'll notice the little word "for" in the middle of verse 1, that introduces a series of several reasons for obeying this command to submit to government. We've considered the first reason. It is that God established the principles and structures of all human authority. That's the message notice of the second sentence of verse 1, "For there is no authority except from God," God is the only true ultimate authority and God has delegated limited authority to people on this planet for its order and its wellbeing. Paul's primary focus here in Romans 13 is the authority that God has delegated to humans as involved in civil government. We learned that God created nations, that's not a human construct, nations are not formed by a social contract. Rather, God created nations beginning back in Genesis right after the flood. And He gave the governments of those nations' their authority, or their right to rule. So, government then, is not a human construct. It is not a social contract. It is a divine mandate.

Now today we come to a second reason that we are to submit to government. And it is this, God has appointed all who currently occupy positions of authority in government. Look again at verse 1. By the way, let me just tell you that we are not going to go this slowly through the rest of these verses. These initial statements are absolutely foundational to grasp and understand. Look at verse 1 again, “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and [*now notice the last part of verse 1*] and those which exist are established by God.” “Those which exist” is literally in Greek “the ones being.” Now this expression “those which exist” so “the ones being,” could possibly refer to several different things. And different interpreters have landed on one of these options throughout the centuries since this was written.

The ones which exist could refer to the various forms of government. Such as monarchies, democracies, oligarchies, in other words the different kinds of governments that exist have been established by God.

A second option is the different levels of government within a given country have been established by God. In our case, of course, that would be the federal, the state, and the local governments.

A third option is that Paul means that the various positions in a particular government. Such as again, in the U.S., this would be the office of president, the members of congress, judges, governors, etc.

A fourth options is that when he says those that exist or which exist, he is referring to the specific individuals who occupy those positions in government. In our case, President Trump, Chief Justice Roberts, Senator McConnell, House Speaker Pelosi, Governor Abbot, etc.

Now when you look at that little list of options, I think we need to start by acknowledging that biblically it is correct to say that all of those are true. But here, the context implies that Paul is not referring to the first three. He is not referring to the forms of government.

He is not referring to the levels within a given government. Or the various positions in government. But rather he is referring here to the individuals who occupy various positions within the government. Why do I say that? Well, look at verse 3. When he comes back to this group, he calls them rulers. He is talking about the people who occupy these positions.

Now the verb established there at the end of verse 1, means to bring about order by arranging, appointing, or putting in place. God has established. He has arranged, appointed, or put in place the existing authorities. Notice this has been accomplished by God. This is really an amazing statement. In context this is a categorical assertion. A categorical assertion that God has put in place. He has arranged. He has appointed. He has ordained all of those men and women who currently occupy positions in civil government.

For the Roman Christians who received this letter in the first century, that included the Emperor Nero. It included the individual members of the Roman Senate. It included all of those who held positions across the Roman Empire and its government. This is a sweeping statement. But you need to be really careful. Because if you are not careful, you can quickly come to some grossly distorted conclusions as a result of what Paul says here. In fact, some have read this verse in Romans 13 and they have thoughtless concluded that God either excuses or even affirms such wicked evil rules as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, and Chairman Mao. And of course, we can have a list from today as well.

So, we need to look at this a little more carefully. A little more in the context of what the Scriptures teach. So, let's begin, as we often do, to make sure we understand what Paul does not mean here. Let's clear the rubble from our thinking and make sure we understand what Paul does not mean in this last statement in verse 1.

First of all, it does not mean that God approves of the character of every person in government. God actually holds every individual ruler at every level of government accountable to Himself. In fact, one of the most sobering passages for those who occupy

any position of authority in government has to be Daniel 5. Where Daniel shows up in the presence of Belshazzar the king. Here is a pagan king who does not acknowledge the God of heaven. And what does Daniel say to him? Daniel 5:27, “You [*Belshazzar*] have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.” God has evaluated you as a person and as a ruler and you don’t measure up. And by the way God does that with all rulers. God weighs the character and the character of the rule of even pagan leaders, at every level of government in every government on the planet. And God demands that all rulers be men and women of character and integrity. This is a different message for a different time but if I had time to show you I would show you some of the character and integrity that leaders even of pagan countries in Old Testament times were supposed to demonstrate. Things like humility before the true God of heaven, morality, honesty, justice, compassion. So, understand then that Paul is not saying that God approves of the character of evil rulers when he says that God has established them in their place.

Secondly, God does not mean here, Paul does not mean under inspiration that God approves of the nature of every person’s rule. That is, how they carry out their duties. Look at the constant confrontation of Israel’s kings by the Old Testament prophets. Again, and again they show up in the face of the kings of the nation and say you are sinning, you are wrong. They are the voice of God to say, “God disapproves of what you are doing.” In fact, one of the most interesting comparisons is to compare Daniel 2 and Daniel 7. Both of them revealing the same truth about a line of empires that would come. You remember the description there. In Daniel 2 you have man’s perspective of the human empires that would unfold. And what is it? It’s this magnificent statue of a human made up of precious metals. This is how man thinks about his nations and empires. That same set of empires is described in Daniel 7 from God’s perspective and they are described as ravenous, wicked, destructive beasts. So, no God does not approve of how those in authority carry out their rule in every case.

Thirdly, Paul does not mean here that God approves of the way every ruler comes to power. God holds Old Testament kings, you remember, there was a span of the Old Testament kings when one after another was assassinated. There was intrigue that led to

the new king being in place. And God holds them accountable for the intrigue, for the assassination, for the murder of those before them. So, God certainly does not approve of how every ruler comes to power. And here is where I really want to get, when you look at what Paul is saying here, he is not saying, he does not mean, that God is, notice this word, “immediately” that is without a mediator, without secondary causes, that God is immediately responsible for establishing wicked abusive leaders and ruthless regimes.

Now again, let’s think biblically, clearly Scripture teaches that God is sovereign over all the world’s kingdoms and its rulers. No one who is in power in human government, is in power apart from His direction or His permission. But when you look at the scope of Scripture you learn that God has allowed Satan to be deeply involved in human government. Let’s think about that for a moment. What does the Scriptures say about Satan’s role in human government?

First of all, it teaches us that God has allowed Satan for His own purposes and for His own time, to be the God of this world. In 1 John 5:19 John writes, “...the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” In John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:11, three separate times John says Satan is the ruler of this world. In Revelation 12:9 it says, “...Satan deceives the whole world.” In Revelation 20:3, Revelation 20:7 and 8, it says Satan deceives the nations of the world. So, understand then that as evil reigns on this planet God, for His own purposes, has allowed Satan to exercise power in this world. He is the god of this world. The ruler of this world.

Secondly, when we think about Satan and his involvement with earthly nations and empires. God has allowed Satan to have limited authority over the kingdoms of this world. Look at Luke 4, you remember in the temptation of Christ, one of the temptations had to do with the kingdoms of this world. Notice verse 5, “And he [*Satan*] led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.” One of the other gospel writers say he showed Him not the seedy side of the kingdoms of this world but their glory. “And the devil said to Him, [*verse 6*] ‘I will give you all this domain and its glory; [*Now notice what he says*] for it has been handed over to me, [*that’s true*] and I

give it to whomever I wish. [*That isn't true*].” Okay, so here Satan says the authority over all of these kingdoms has, for a time, been handed over to me. And Jesus doesn't question that. Instead Jesus doesn't rise to the bait, He doesn't accept the opportunity to skip God's plan and the cross to receive what He is ultimately going to receive by his obedience, the kingdoms of this world. Instead He says no, you are not going to tempt Me to do that. But God has allowed Satan this limited authority.

Thirdly, God has allowed Satan to appoint specific demons to influence earthly rulers, nations, and kingdoms. We have seen this in Daniel chapter 10, I'm not going to take time to walk back through that. If you weren't here, go listen to Daniel 10. Listen to the interchange that happens there between angels and demons as they battle over the nations of the world. But in Daniel 10:13, we read this, “But the prince of the kingdom of Persia [*in context he is talking about a demonic prince, a demon of the kingdom of Persia here is a demon assigned by Satan to the empire of Persia*] was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia.” Again, the kings of Persia is a spiritual reference, not the physical kings, but rather the spiritual forces that were dominating the empire of Persia. You understand that Satan is alive and well and very much involved in this world and he has powerful influence through demons he has appointed in every capital of every nation on this planet. Now the good news is, God has not abandoned this world to Satan, He has His angels who are also involved. And that is also part of the point of Daniel 10. God Himself is superintending all of that to accomplish His own purpose. This in other words, the end of the story, isn't in question. But nevertheless, it's important to recognize this reality.

Fourthly, God has allowed Satan to place, to empower, and to use rulers to oppose God and His purposes. Look at Psalm 2:1, “Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” This is ultimately an expression of the fallenness of humankind and its rebellion against God. But it is captured in the nations and the kings of

the earth and the rulers uniting together against the Lord and against His Anointed One. In Ezekiel 28, I won't have you turn there, but in Ezekiel 28, you have an interesting passage, beginning in verse 11: where there is a description of the king of Tyre but beginning in verse 11 there is a description of the one behind the king of Tyre who was empowering him, who was using him, who was directing his activity, and when you read that passage it's clearly Satan. Because there are descriptions there that cannot be a description of the king of Tyre. You were in the Eden of God, you were clothed with perfection, you were the covering cherub. And so, clearly there is a description of the fact that behind the earthly human king of Tyre there was a spiritual being, Satan himself, empowering him, using him for his own purposes. And of course, that will ultimately be fulfilled with the anti-Christ, one of the greatest rulers in terms of worldwide authority that will ever live. In 2 Thessalonians 2:8 and 9 it says. "Then that lawless one will be revealedwho's coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders."

So, for now, our Lord had chosen to allow Satan power over the world system and the nations of our world. So, the last sentence in verse 1 does not mean that God is immediately, that is without a mediator, responsible for establishing wicked rulers and ruthless regimes. He has Satan on a leash, and He allows him to have that influence.

So then, having considered what Paul doesn't mean, lets then quickly ask the question, what does Paul mean. What does Paul mean here? He means three things I think primarily when he makes the statement at the end of verse 1. First of all, that God is ultimately, notice the difference between immediately and ultimately. God is ultimately responsible for appointing all earthly rulers, either personally installing them or allowing Satan to install them for a time and for God's own purposes. In 1 Timothy 6:15, the Father is called "He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords." God ultimately rules over all governments and their leaders. It was true of Pharaoh. In Romans 9:17, "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.'" It was true of Nebuchadnezzar as we have seen in Daniel 4,

God says I raised you up and I will put you down. In Cyrus' life we see this, in Isaiah 45:4, it says "for the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, [*Cyrus*] I have called you by your name; [*Listen to this*] I have given you a title of honor." And of course, it was even true of Pilate. Jesus in John 19 said, "You would have no authority unless it had been given you from above." It was true of Nero because that's the primary one about whom Paul writes here in Romans 13.

James Montgomery Boice writes, "There is no ruler anywhere, or from anytime in history who was not set in his exalted position by God." So, whether personally installs a ruler or whether he allows Satan to do so, God is still ultimately responsible, and He takes that responsibility. But, by doing it that way, God is not responsible for the evil that wicked leaders commit. The Adolf Hitlers of the world, the Idi Amins, the dictators of our world. So, we need to understand that. Sometimes God raises up good and wise leaders as a blessing to the people, other times He allows Satan to raise up immoral, wicked, inexperienced, incompetent rulers as a punishment or judgment for the people. But ultimately God is responsible.

Secondly, I think Paul means, when he says the ones that exist have been established by God, he is reminding us of the reality that one day our Lord will take back this world entirely from Satan from its Satanic governments and rulers and will establish his own perfect earthly kingdom. God is in charge and someday He's going to take personal charge. God's given the ultimate right to rule over this world and its kingdoms to His Son. Revelation 1:5 "Jesus Christ, ... the ruler of the kings of the earth." And one day He will exercise that right and He will rid this world of all of its evil rulers. Read the end of Revelation. Read Revelation 19 where the One with the name the King of kings and Lord of lords descends and destroys His enemies. Including all of those rulers who have fought against Him and against God.

Thirdly, I think this is an important implication here because God is ultimately responsible for appointing all earthly rulers, directly or indirectly, we must submit, obey, and honor all those in positions of government authority. Ultimately God is responsible,

and He takes that responsibility. That means we don't have the right to refuse to submit to them. That includes evil, bad rulers. Nebuchadnezzar, they were told to submit to Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah 27 and Jeremiah 29. They were told in the New Testament to submit to Nero in Romans 13 and in 1 Peter 2.

Charles Hodge writes, "We are to obey all that are in actual authority over us whether their authority be legitimate or usurped, whether they are just or unjust."

John Calvin writes, "If we have continually present to our minds and before our eyes, the fact that even the most worthless kings are appointed by the same decree by which the authority of all things is established, then those seditious thoughts will never enter our minds that a king should be treated according to his merits. And that it is unfair that we should show ourselves subject to him who on his part does not show himself the king to us." In other words, you have to get that out of your mind. It has nothing to do with the competency or the justness of the ruler.

This is the example of the righteous in the Scripture you see this. I mean think about David, David submitted to and showed respect for an evil monarch, Saul, who sought to take his life unjustly. Although, of course, he did flee from being killed. But nevertheless, he submitted to and showed respect for Saul. Daniel willingly submitted to the absolute monarchs of Babylon, including Nebuchadnezzar before his conversion, Nebuchadnezzar after his conversion. And to Belshazzar who never was converted.

Jesus submitted to and showed respect for a subjugating army and its leaders, Pilate and Herod both of them wicked and unjust men. If you doubt that just read the gospels. Paul submitted to various local and national leaders. Many of whom were evil and unjust and who treated him unjustly. So it comes down to this folks, if God is sovereign over all earthly rulers, appointing some for our blessing and allowing others for our judgment and His own purposes, then we must submit, obey, and honor all of those who are in positions of authority.

Now let's make this really personal. I want you to think for just a moment about specific leaders in our own country that you very much disagree with. And whose leadership you don't think is right. Whether that's federal, state or local, whether that's executive, legislative, or judicial. Let me just ask you pointedly this question. Do you believe that God directly or indirectly put those people in their positions either as a blessing or as a just punishment? And do you believe that they were established in their positions by God ultimately. Listen you can disagree wholeheartedly with all they stand for. You can work to see them replaced through the democratic process. But as long as they are in their positions, you and I need to be in subjection to them. Obey their laws that are not contrary to the Scripture and honor their persons because of the position they hold and because they were established in that position by God for His own purposes. You say, "How in the world can we do that?" We can do that because we know that this isn't where our citizenship is. We're waiting for the day when our King comes and establishes his perfect rule on this planet. May God help us to respond like this.

Let's pray together. Our Father thank You for what we have learned from Romans 13. Forgive us for our disrespect. Forgive us for how we have accepted and abided the mindset of the age we live in and how we think about those in leadership. Lord give us the balance, help us to rightly disagree, help us to rightly point out injustices where they belong, where they are. But Father help us at the same time not to cross the boundary, the clear statements and teaching of Your word. Father help us to live out the gospel in how we respond to government. And now as we turn our hearts to the Lord's table, Lord I pray that you would enable us to worship You through Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.