

Governing Authorities (Part 2)

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[0:00] And if you have a copy of the Scriptures with you, then I'd like you to open up your Bibles to Romans chapter 13.

! If you don't have your own copy of the Bible with you, that's okay. We have some Bibles that are scattered out in the chairs. And if you're using one of those, just turn to page 948 and you'll find Romans 13 right there in those Bibles.

Romans 13. We began looking at this chapter last week, the first seven verses. And we're going to continue to think about and study those verses this morning and next week.

And then, God willing, we will move on past the first seven verses of Romans chapter 13. But it's purely by God's providence that we have arrived to look at what the Apostle Paul has to say to us, the people of God, about how we are to relate to human governments as we approach our national elections.

We've been in Romans for over two years. So I did not set out two years ago and outline all of the book of Romans so that we would land at this spot in this month of this year. God has providentially guided us as we've walked our way through this book.

[1:18] And there have been a number of times where we have landed on passages in Romans that are timely for us as a congregation. And now, even broader than our congregation, timely for us in the nation in which we live.

And so I want you guys to sort of focus your attention here. We're going to read through these first seven verses again. And then we'll dive in. All right. So would you guys stand to your feet in honor of God's Word and read with me?

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.

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.

[2:16] 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. Let's pray. Father, thank You for this Word.

We thank You that Your Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write down these words for our benefit. And I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit this morning that they would indeed be for our benefit.

Help us to understand and help us to rightly live in accordance with the principles of Your Word. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. You guys take a seat.

[3:16] Amen. I'm not sure how many of you have ever read the book, The Lord of the Flies. Probably a lot of you were required to read it at some point in school. Some of you bought the Cliff Notes and read the Cliff Notes.

Some of you watched the movie instead of reading the book. And two or three of you probably actually read the book. That's okay. I'm sure at some point I was assigned it, and I've never made it through the entire book. Most of the book that I've gotten through is when I'm having to talk about it with kids.

But the story of *The Lord of the Flies* is a very interesting story because it's the story of a group of young boys on the cusp of being teenagers who find themselves stranded on an island.

And during their time on that island, they break into factions. They develop these different groups, and things get worse and worse. They get darker and darker as the book moves on.

You get towards the end of the book, and you have these two warring factions. And there's murder, and there's all sorts of problems that ensue amongst them. And really the book serves to illustrate several things, but a couple of different things that have stood out to me every time I've read portions of the book or every time I've seen bits of the movie is that it really emphasizes that we as human beings just sort of naturally clump together in groups.

[4:28] That's what we do. There's nothing wrong with that. That's how we're designed. That's how we're created. We are social. That's how we're made. In fact, when God looked at Adam by Himself in the garden, He said, it's not good for the man to be alone.

And so He formed Eve not only to be a wife for Adam, but so that they might multiply on the earth, and indeed that there might be more people to clump together in more groups. That's just what we do because that's how God made us.

And so in that book you see them grouping together, but not only grouping together, but developing these social hierarchies. You've got leaders of the different groups and those who have their sort of assignments within the group in which they are a part of.

That's normal and natural. But then you also see in the book that they're also fallen and sinful. That there's a darkness that's there from the very beginning, and it only grows and grows.

And the more power that one has, the more that darkness seems to take over. Until the end of the book you've got all sorts of disaster. And it's to be an illustration for us of not only what happens when a bunch of young boys are left alone.

[5:30] I can see that happening in my own house. All I have to do is go in a room and shut the door and come out two hours later, and several things are broken. Somebody's bleeding. Somebody's crying. I mean, I could do that experiment just in my house.

The reality is, though, that because we live in a fallen world and because we are sinful fallen people, no matter what authority structures we build up, no matter what ways and means we try to provide to protect us from one another, there's still going to be evil in the world.

So we are naturally drawn to organization and social groupings, but sin seems to trip that up all the time. And last week, as we were looking at what Paul has to say to us about human governments, which we said were natural groupings of people together, beginning with family groups, and then growing and expanding beyond that into what we now call nations.

Last week, as we looked at that, one of the things that we saw for Romans 13 is that it is God's will, God's desire and God's plan that we actually form these institutions.

Over and over in this passage, Paul refers to human governments as his servant or his minister.

That's why they exist. They exist, Paul says, because God has instituted them.

[6:48] God has ordained them. So that we saw that understanding God's sovereignty and trusting and believing that God is sovereign in the affairs of the world, and even in the institutions under whose authority we come, believing in God's sovereignty is one of the keys to being able to interact with those groups in the ways in which we're supposed to.

And the primary disposition that Paul says we're supposed to have towards those in authority over us is one of submission. So he says at the very beginning of this passage, 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.

So God sovereignly determines the nations. He sets up kingdoms and rulers, and we, as God's people, are to be submissive to those rulers and to those who are in authority.

We saw that. We established that last week. And so this morning, I have a fairly modest goal, and that is I want to ask a very basic question to begin with. What should we expect of these governing authorities that God Himself is sovereign over?

Can we have expectations of them? And if we can, what ought those expectations to be, given the fact that we live in a fallen world? And then, what should we expect of ourselves beyond just simple submission?

[8:13] How are we to conduct ourselves in the light of the expectations that we should have of the governing authorities that are over us?

One of the things that I said last week that I think is key for us moving ahead this week and understanding our expectations for civil governments is to realize that what Paul is writing here in Romans chapter 13 is not a list of promises about how every government is going to act. He says some things in here that sometimes we back up and we think, I don't know about that. I can think of some pretty bad rulers. I can think of some pretty evil dictators throughout history. You can even look in the world around us today and see some really wicked, evil governments. And you're telling me that they're God's servant. You're telling me that they're supposed to punish those who do wrong and praise those who do right. And we shake our heads at that idea. And so the question becomes, how do we then understand Romans 13? We ought not to understand it as a simple promise about how every government is going to act.

[9:22] Simply because God is sovereign in the institution of all of these governments does not mean that He promises us that they will all behave in a righteous manner. They will not and they do not because they are not only rulers of fallen people, but they are fallen rulers themselves.

So I said last week that we should understand Romans 13 and the statements that Paul makes about the role of the government in much the same way that we should approach the book of Proverbs. When we read the Proverbs, sometimes we make the mistake of treating them as if they are ironclad promises of God.

And then we become disappointed and sometimes we will even doubt the truthfulness of God's Word when those quote-unquote promises do not seem to be fulfilled toward us. I'll give you a really good example.

I gave you one example last week. I want to give you another one. Hold your place in Romans 13 and turn all the way back to the book of Proverbs, roughly in the middle of your Bible, to Proverbs chapter 10. There are several here that we could look at to prove and show the case that the Proverbs are not promises about how things always will be.

In fact, you can look at verse 4 in Proverbs chapter 10. We read there, A slack hand, that is a lazy person, is going to be poor.

[10:41] That's what Solomon is telling us. Lazy people will be poor, but those who work hard will be rich. Okay, but I've known lazy people who stumble into a whole lot more money than I think I will ever have.

And I've known people who work hard all their lives and they would never qualify by anyone's standard as wealthy and rich. So what is Solomon telling us in Proverbs chapter 10?

What's the point of even saying that if we're all aware of exceptions to both sides of that? He's telling us how things normally work out. All things being even, then if you have two individuals and one is a hard worker and one is not a hard worker, one will prosper, the other will not.

And we know that that is true. That's why we try to teach our children not to be lazy. Do your chores. Learn a good work ethic. Work hard. Don't just sit around and wait for things to happen because you've got to get out there and actually do something.

We teach those basic principles to our children because we know that they're true. And if you read the book of Proverbs as a set of principles describing how the world normally operates, then you will not grow doubtful of God's Word.

[11:50] You will read a proverb like that and you'll say, Yeah, that's true. Yeah, I get that. That's true. Yes, I know of several exceptions to that rule, but I call them exceptions because it's a good rule. It is something that we see happening in the world around us.

I think we should approach what Paul says are the responsibilities of governments in the same way as we read Romans chapter 13. Paul is describing to us, under normal circumstances, how governments function and indeed how we ought to expect them to function.

But he's not promising us that they will always do this. Some governments will not do this at all. And some governments, all governments will do this here and there with failures many times.

But there's a general pattern that takes place that we can see at work, all things being equal. Did Paul's description of the role of the government here accurate? So let's look at what that description is, okay?

Take a look at verse 3. We'll jump in there. He says, Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. That's why they exist. They're not there to cause trouble for those who do good.

[13:01] They're not there to scare you away from doing what's right. They are there to create fear in those who would do wrong, who would do bad. And so Paul comes to the conclusion and asks

the rhetorical question, Would you then have no fear of the one who's in authority?

Of course the answer is yes. I don't want to fear the person who's in authority. Then do what is good and you will receive his approval. So that's the role of the government.

To create fear among those who would do evil and to give praise or approval to those who would do good. But it becomes even more explicit. Verse 4, For he is God's servant for your good.

But if you do wrong, be afraid. For he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is a servant of God and avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

That is the fundamental role and function of every human government on the face of the earth. It is to bear the sword of God and execute God's wrath on those who do wrong in this world.

[14:04] Of course, God will ultimately set all things right. We know that. We've seen that throughout the book of Romans and we see that throughout the Bible. There will be a judgment day. There will be a time when God finally and fully sets all things right and he judges those for their sin who deserve judgment, which is all of us.

Some will be judged on judgment day and spend forever suffering for our sins. Some have already been judged in Christ upon the cross and received his righteousness as a free gift.

And so we'll enjoy eternity in his presence. But judgment will come. We have seen over and over for all people. That day is coming. But now in this world, the government exists to bear the sword.

It does not do that in vain. It is to be about the business of punishing those who do wrong. That's the primary role of every government upon the face of the earth.

And to greater and lesser degrees, most governments, and I mean the vast majority of governments, do perform that function. I can't think of any place in the world where if you're caught, even by a wicked, evil government, if you're caught stealing from your neighbor, where you will not be punished.

[15:18] That's generally going to happen. Yes, there are exceptions to the rule. Yes, people get away with things all the time. Yes, there are loopholes in the laws that are created. We know all of that.

But generally speaking, if you steal from your neighbor and you're caught, the role of the government is to punish you. And that's what they do the vast majority of the time.

When Paul says that they are to punish those who do bad, he has in mind a general moral set of principles that are agreed upon across the world.

Of course, sometimes we refer to that as the moral law. You can get a better idea for the kinds of things that Paul is describing as good and bad if you just glance down in chapter 13 where Paul begins to describe genuine love.

Look down at verse 8. Owe no one anything except to love one another for the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law. And then he lists commandments. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder.

[16:17] You shall not steal. You shall not covenant. Those are general moral principles that are recognized throughout the world, even among non-Christians, even among those with no exposure to special revelation.

We have seen in the book of Romans, in Romans chapter 2, that there is a kind of law written on everyone's heart. So these basic principles of how to treat your neighbor are present within every human being.

We're fallen, and so we live our lives oftentimes contrary to those principles, but they're written, they're engraved upon our hearts. And so it is the duty of the government to ensure that those who violate those basic principles should be punished.

That's why governments exist. So that if you murder someone, you pay the penalty for murder. If you steal from someone, you pay the penalty for stealing. And no matter how flawed a government may be, we must always cling to and hold to that it is better to have a government in place who can do these things than to have chaos to rule and reign.

It's good. The fact that we have civil authorities around us is a good blessing from God Himself. But there's another side to that coin where we are told not only is it the role of the government to punish those who do evil, that's the primary job, but secondarily, in addition to that, we are told that if we do good, we will receive His approval or literally the praise of the government.

[17:48] Peter says the exact same thing in 1 Peter when he addresses our submission to government rulers. The role of the government is, the role of those in authority is to punish those

who do evil, to praise those who do good.

And so the role of the government is to create a kind of setting and situation in which good, civil good toward your neighbor is encouraged and evil is held back through threat of punishment. That's the role of the government. Now we have a response to that. Of course, our general response is submit to the governing authorities. We know that from verse 1 of chapter 13. But Paul gets into a little bit more detail in this paragraph in showing us how we should respond in light of knowing what the role of the government actually is.

Glance back at the text again. We're going to look again at verse 3, the end of verse 3, where Paul says, Then do what is good, so if you don't want to be afraid, do what is good, and you will receive His approval, for He, that is the government, for He is God's servant for your good.

Now, a slightly more literal translation of that phrase would be that He is God's servant to you for good. If you're reading from the American Standard of the King James Version this morning, you can probably see that a little bit more clearly than the English Standard.

[19:13] But it's, He is God's servant to you for good. So the government exists to serve God, but ultimately the government serves God by serving its citizens.

By being a servant to you. And what is the goal of this service to the citizens? It is good. What good? Is it to do good to the citizens?

That's a possible way to interpret this passage. But I don't think it's quite right. I think Paul's point is saying that the government, the role of the government, is to serve God by serving its citizens, by freeing them up, so that they might do good.

So the good in mind here is the good that you are enabled to do because the government is actually in place to protect you from those who would do evil to you. I say that because it goes on to say, but if you do wrong.

In other words, if you do the opposite of the good that I've just mentioned, then you need to be afraid. But the government is there to free you to go out and do good. So it's not necessarily the role of the government to do good directly to you, but it's the role of the government to create the circumstances in which you can flourish and go out and do good in the world in which you live.

[20:32] That's the role of the government. And so our response to that is twofold. On the one hand, we ought to be about the business of doing good and avoiding the doing of evil.

But if you do wrong, be afraid because he doesn't bear the sword in vain. So on our worst days, we should seek to do good because we're afraid of the punishment that will come if we do evil on our worst days.

And that governs not just believers, that governs everybody. Let every person, every soul, he says, be subject in verse 1. So that everyone's attitude in a given community, under a given authority, ought to be, on our worst days, I will do good because if I do bad, I will be punished by those in authority.

On better days, there is a better motive, though, that Paul gives us for those who would do good for the society in which they live. Glance down a little bit further in the text to verse 5.

Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, okay, so that's the bad day. I'm going to do what's right because I don't want to get in trouble. It's not the best motive, but it's better than nothing.

[21:51] Not only to avoid God's wrath, but also, he says, for the sake of conscience. In other words, you're not only trying to avoid the government's disapproval, but you want to live your life in such a way that at the end of the day, or at the end of the year, or at the end of your life even, you might look back and say, I've done well.

My conscience is clear. So that on a daily basis, even a non-Christian, even someone devoid of the Spirit of God, can live under governing authorities by saying, on their bad days, I'm afraid of being punished, therefore I will do good to my neighbor and not bad.

And on better days, and hopefully on the whole in their lives, they will stand back and say, for the sake of my conscience, so that I don't have to end my day or my life knowing that I've lived a wasted, terrible, morally depraved life, for the sake of my conscience, I will do good.

Now, we're not moving there yet, but we've already read the verses beginning in verse 8 that enjoin a higher ethic for followers of Jesus. An ethic of love that automatically does good and fulfills these moral commands.

And we're headed that way, so I don't want you to think, boy, that's terrible motivation that you're giving us, Pastor, for how to live in this world. Why don't you say something a little bit more Christian? All right? That's coming.

[23:18] But these instructions by Paul cover everybody, every soul, every person should be in subjection and should be in subjection in these specific ways. Ways that correspond to the role of the governor.

The government is to punish those who do wrong, so out of fear of punishment, we avoid doing wrong. The government is to praise those who do right, and so for the sake of conscience, we do right.

That's what we should expect of the government, but it's not what we are promised in this passage from any government. We know in reality that we're going to have to deal with corrupt government. We know in reality that we look around the world and we see evil rulers in place doing horrible, awful things to the people under their rule. We know that that's true.

And so anytime that you walk through a passage like this, in light of the world in which we live, we're always forced to ask the question, but what do you do if? What do you do if your government goes off the deep end and begins to do these sorts of things?

[24:27] And we could list all sorts of terrible, awful things that are actually, even today, being done in some places around the world? Or what do you do if you're surrounded by corruption in your government?

What do you do if the systems themselves have become corrupt? What do you do if your choice of leadership consists of those who are only corrupt? What do you do in that sort of situation? How do you conduct yourself as a citizen? And I want to give you sort of a two-fold answer. The first part of this answer is simply to return to what the Apostle Paul says and to remind you of the context in which Paul was writing.

Paul was not writing under ideal circumstances. In fact, he was writing to believers in the city of Rome. And they were aware of what those granted authority by the leaders in Rome had done. Pilate, appointed by Caesar to administer justice in Palestine, ordered the crucifixion of Jesus.

[25:32] Paul is not dealing with ideal circumstances. He's aware of that. His original readers are aware of that. And we ought to be aware of that. So that merely because we look and see that our government has some corruption in it, even corruption that we go, oh, that's awful, that does not automatically or ought not to automatically incline us to rebellion against those authorities that have been instituted by God Himself.

It does not. The default attitude of every follower of Jesus ought to be, I will submit to governing authorities that God Himself has instituted.

That ought to be our default attitude. There are, however, instances in which our submission bumps up against its limit.

Some are obvious. Some are obvious. If you are commanded or required by a governing authority to do something that violates the clear commands of God's Word, we have a higher authority.

We have a greater king to whom we are called to account and to whom we must submit. And so in those moments, we don't submit to the lesser authority. We submit to the greater authority.

[26:48] So if we are told as believers that we have to violate our principles that have been laid down for us in God's Word, then we, calmly, and with no desire to foment rebellion, with no desire to actually rebel against the government, we rebel in that moment.

We say, No. I would like to submit to you. But I have to submit to Jesus first. And so I cannot do that which you have asked me and called me to do.

We are prone, though, to take those exceptions, to tie them to every little thing that we dislike, and make up excuses for refusal to submit to the authorities that God has placed in our life.

So let me give you an argument that I've heard that I don't like. I've heard believers say, The government does bad things with my tax money, so I won't pay my taxes even though I'm supposed to, even though they've ordered me to.

I won't do it. Because they're going to do bad things with my tax money. The Romans built crosses with tax money. That's what they did. The Romans formed armies so that they could conquer other lands and enslave the peoples of those other lands with tax money.

[28:14] That's what they did. And Jesus says, Render to Caesar what Caesar is. And Paul says, Pay to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed.

You see what we have a tendency to do? We have a tendency to say, Okay, I shouldn't submit if it requires me to disobey Jesus they're going to disobey Jesus if I give them the means by which they're going to do it.

So I'm going to rebel. And yet we find no justification for that in the Scripture. Our default setting as followers of Jesus ought to be to submit to the governing authorities.

Recognizing that there will be limits. There will be places where we draw a line and we stand and we say, No more. And what we have to change, I think, in our mindset is we have to stop being concerned with ensuring that the authorities around us do what is right all the time and busy ourselves with showing people how they might become right before God Himself.

We are a people called to a mission. And that mission is to go and to make disciples. We have a clear mandate. We have a clear mission.

[29:41] That doesn't mean that we can't be involved in the things of the world. It doesn't mean that you can't serve within the government. It doesn't mean any of those things. Many of you work a job for large corporations and companies and you're a cog in the wheel of that.

And that doesn't mean when that company goes out and does something immoral that you are necessarily, unless you're directly involved, that you are necessarily involved in evil and have to quit your job.

We don't have to disengage from our involvement in civic affairs in order to be faithful to Jesus. We don't have to do that. But we have to know where the lines are drawn.

We have to stand steadfastly and securely. And we have to come with an attitude of saying, I will recognize the authorities that God has put in place as far as I can.

And then I will resolutely say, no more. It's a Christian ethic for how to live as a good citizen in a world of which we are ultimately not far.

[30:44] And it's not easy. It's not easy. I came up with a dozen different specific applications for this sermon. And for every one, I thought I'm leaving out a dozen more that I ought to be doing because there are just so many issues and situations, particularly when you live in a society where the government leaders are voted into office by us.

It only complicates things further. And I recognize that. I know that things are messy. But things are messy because we live in a fallen world, not because the word of God is not clear.

And we have the hope of the messiness being removed someday. See, it's not that government is bad. It's not bad. Nor is it merely that government exists as a necessary evil to curb greater evil.

That's not true either. The greatest form of government that will ever exist does not exist in this nation. because it's not a democracy and it's not a republic.

It's not a constitutionally organized nation. It is a monarchy with a perfect king and purified citizens. And no matter how entangled we feel and no matter how messy we feel now in this world and in this life and with the options before us and with everything that happens that would tend to get us down, we have the hope of knowing there's a perfect king ruling over a perfect kingdom.

[32:15] And he will draw all those who belong to him fully into that kingdom one day. And until then, he has our highest allegiance and he has appointed ruling authorities to which we submit as far as we can.

Pray.