

**Faith Evangelical Free Church**  
**Romans 13:1-7; God, Government, and Me**  
**Sunday, March 6, 2016**

There may be no more divisive topic of conversation among human beings than that of government, its purpose, and our role and responsibility regarding it.

Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense* and Founding Father to the United States once said, "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one."

The extremely quotable Winston Churchill once remarked, "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter."

According to Nobel Prize Winner Milton Friedman, "The greatest advances of civilization, whether in architecture or painting, in science and literature, in industry or agriculture, have never come from centralized government."

Fortunately, we need not rely on the opinions of political theorists, prime ministers, or nobel prize winners. Although it never advocates for the supremacy of monarchy, democracy, dictatorship or communal rule, Scripture does have much to say and teach us regarding the relationship between God, government, and us.

This morning we're going to continue our study of the Book of Romans and take a look at what Paul has to say concerning the rule, reason, and results of our interactions with government as believers in Jesus Christ.

**The Rule: Be Subject to Governing Authority**

Before we get into the text I think it's important to understand the historical context in which Paul was writing this letter. Specifically, we need to know what had happened and was happening to the people he was writing to, the believers living in the city of Rome.

In 49 AD, roughly 16 years after Christ's death and resurrection and about 8-10 years before Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, a man named Claudius was Emperor. During his reign tensions between the Jews and the Christians had gotten pretty high, and on several occasions there had been -- let's call them "public disturbances" -- between the groups. Rome had little patience for disturbers of the peace, and since they still viewed Christianity as a new sect or offshoot of Judaism, the Roman governing officials came up with a plan: kick all the Jews out of Rome. It didn't matter if you were Jew, Jewish Christian, or even in some cases a non-Jewish Christian; if you worshipped the One God of the Hebrews, you were out (we can read about two such Jewish believers, Priscilla and Aquila, in Acts 18).

For six years hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Jews and Jewish Christians were forced from their homes by their governing authorities. Then, in 54 AD, Claudius died. A man named Nero became Emperor and lifted the expulsion order.

Nero was a complicated guy. The first couple years of his reign were okay -- he raised taxes and was increasingly paranoid of being overthrown by his political enemies, but that was hardly out of the ordinary for Roman Emperors. As time went on, however, Nero got worse -- much worse. He began to see Christianity as a threat to something called the *Pax Romana*, or the Roman Peace -- Rome was famous worldwide for the peace (aka lack of uprisings) throughout its vast empire, but infamous for its means of maintaining that peace: militant enforcement through harsh punishments and violent, bloody police action against those who challenged the Empire.

Now when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, Nero's persecution of Christians had not yet reached its worst -- not by a long shot. (At its worst, Nero arrested Christians with little and often no cause, burned them at the stake during parties, and probably set fire to his own city, then blamed the fire on Christians). Nevertheless, he wasn't making life easy on them. He demanded large taxes from all his people -- taxes that paid for some good things (roads, public works, state-sponsored aid) and some things that probably made Christians uncomfortable (tribute to the Roman gods, the expansion of Nero's palaces, and the continued funding of Rome's fearsome military).

So to a people who have been forcefully commanded to leave their homes, heavily and overly taxed, made to pay for things they very likely did not personally or spiritually like, and who were beginning to experience the early stages of frightening, life-threatening, government-sponsored persecution...

...to these people Paul writes:

*"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." - Romans 13:1*

Every. Person.

Every person who has dedicated their life to God and who is being renewed by the transformation of their mind...be subject to the governing authorities.

Every person who seeks to think about themselves and their gifts with sober judgment...be subject to the governing authorities.

Every person who strives to outdo their brother or sister in Christ in love and service...be subject to the governing authorities.

Every person who takes up the difficult task of blessing those who curse them, of repaying evil with good, and living peaceably with all...be subject to the governing authorities.

Every person who was already all-too familiar with how bad the Roman government could be...be subject to the governing authorities.

Paul's rule regarding how Christians should relate to human government -- as true for us today as it was to the people he first instructed -- is to be subject to the governing authorities.

To submit ourselves to the laws of the land, to willingly place ourselves under the authority of another, to do our best to obey all that is right and all that is good, and sometimes to obey even when what is considered right and good conflicts with what we know and believe to be true (More on this later).

### **The Reason: God Appoints and Establishes All Authority**

I don't know about you...but to me that's a tough rule to follow. You almost wish you could call Paul up and ask him, "Paul, have you seen my governing authorities? Do you know what they are doing to things like education, and healthcare, and devaluing of human life? You wouldn't believe some of the things they want to use my taxes for. Paul, open the glove box in my car and just look at the number of UNJUST K-State parking tickets I have! You're telling me I have to subject myself to them?!"

And Paul would say...yes. Yes, because it's not about being subject to "them"...it's about being subject to Him."

You see, the rule of Romans 13:1-7 is, "be subject to the governing authorities," but the REASON is that as Christians we are blessed to understand that those who are in authority over us were appointed and established by God. As Christians we trust that our God really is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, ruling unchallenged from the heavens, and therefore we can willingly subject ourselves to those in earthly authority over us because we know we are ultimately subjecting ourselves to the author of our salvation and the perfecter of our faith.

*"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." - Romans 13:1*

If I could give you once piece of advice in trying to understand this passage it would be this: don't be distracted or disappointed with the command to obey earthly authorities. Instead be encouraged and empowered by the truth that there is an authority greater than any that ever has or ever will walk this earth. It is to that authority -- the Triune God -- that we ultimately submit, and any subsequent submission is an expression of our commitment to his will.

So we know that in regards to our relationship to human government, the rule is to be subject to governing authorities.

And we know that the reason for this rule is that God has appointed and established all authorities, so our subjection to them is really our subjection to Him. It's ultimately a matter of obedience to God.

Now we need to consider the results of this understanding -- what difference does it make that God appoints and establishes human authorities on earth?

### **The Results: What Difference Does it Make that God Establishes Human Government?**

Paul provides some answers to this question as he continues his letter:

*"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 for the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." - Romans 13:2-5*

Now, I have no doubt that for many of you these four verses are going to raise a lot of questions and create a great deal of tension between what Paul wrote and what we see in the world. We've all read some history, we've all heard some stories, and some of us, perhaps many of us, have experiences in which we'd question the validity of a statement like "rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad."

Unfortunately, this morning I cannot provide an answer to every one of those questions. What I can do is affirm you in asking them -- it's good to wrestle with the text, to pray for discernment, and to challenge ourselves with the task of making sense of the world through the lens of Scripture.

So what I offer you this morning are three foundational truths that I hope will give you some clarity on why God establishes human government, and our responsibility toward earthly authority.

**First is to remember:** Remember that because God appoints all human authority, it means God is always, ultimately in control.

Throughout vv. 2-5 Paul repeatedly draws our eyes and devotion not to the governing authority itself, but to God.

He says that to resist authority is to resist God himself, that in submitting to authority we submit to a servant of God's will, and that the punishments we may receive for resisting or disobeying the laws of the land and the lawmakers that created them are understood as the acts of "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

Governments and governing authorities participate in the plans of God and carry out the will of God. They do this when they're at their best and when they're at their worst.

Scripture is filled with examples of God's will being achieved through good and bad governments and good and bad leaders. The prophet and judge Samuel from the Old Testament was celebrated by the people of Israel as a fair and just leader, and under his leadership the nation was frequently called back to right worship and relationship with God.

David and Solomon, while certainly flawed and imperfect leaders, did a great deal of good for their people and did their best to lead with the nation's best interests in mind. Under these men Israel flourished and God's will for the people was accomplished.

Yet God does not require faithful rulers to accomplish his will. Sometimes he works through nations and governments that seek to oppose him, but could never hope to overcome him.

Nowhere is this more clear than in Jesus Christ's exchange with Pilate in John 19. Christ has been arrested, falsely accused by the Jewish rulers, and unjustly flogged by the Roman rulers. The governor Pilate has the beaten and bloodied Jesus dragged before him and with the arrogance and egotism that mere human beings all too often have before the Lord of Creation, says,

*"Will you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" To which Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given [to] you from above." (John 19:10-11)*

We may not always understand the why or the how, but God promises us that he is always in control. Whether we find ourselves submitting to a good government or bad government, we can take comfort in the knowledge that we're truly, ultimately submitted to the only ruler who cannot fail us and will not forsake us.

So, when considering what it means for God to have appointed and established all human government, first we need to remember that because God appoints all human authority, it means God is always, ultimately in control.

**Second, we need to recognize the responsibility this passage places on us.** As Christians, we're called to be good citizens of the countries, cultures, and governments we find ourselves in while living in this world.

In this passage Paul argues that, in general, government exists to promote good citizenship and establish order, through both positive and negative consequences. If we obey laws and respect the authority God had placed over us, we'll likely be rewarded by peaceful living. If we break laws we bring upon ourselves fear and judgment.

Last fall I was going through the interview process for my position here at Faith, which meant a number of trips for my wife and I from Kansas City to Manhattan. On one of those trips we got really early on a Sunday left KC in hopes of reaching Faith in time for the 8am service. When we started our trip it was raining which slowed me down a bit, but the weather broke shortly after Lawrence, and in order to make up time...I assumed a speed that could be considered excessive and worthy of punishment.

Sure enough, as I zoomed beneath an overpass, a highway patrolman clocked me, popped his lights on, and a few hundred yards later I was presented with a ticket for a few hundred bucks.

Now when his lights came on, you know what I felt? (I'm sure many of you do). It was that immediate panic, fear, and regret that confirms for you that you've done something wrong and been caught while doing so. Now had I obeyed the law and driven the speed limit, I'd have had no reason to fear the highway patrolman, nor would I have found myself in the unpleasant situation of having to submit myself to a negative consequence of government (being punished for bad conduct).

It's a simplistic example, but for the most part Paul's talking about the more simplistic, day-to-day obediences we all know we need to be a part of. Driving the speed limit, paying for a hunting license, STAYING OFF OUR PHONES WHILE WE DRIVE IN THE CITY LIMITS OF MANHATTAN. All of us are capable of doing these things, and our obedience to the laws expresses our obedience to authority, and our obedience to authority ultimately expresses our devotion to God.

So we need to remember that God is always in control of earthly authority, and we need to recognize that we have a God-given responsibility to be good citizens of Manhattan, KS (and beyond).

**The third thing we need to consider** when seeking to understand our relationship to government is when, if ever, Paul's rule of being subject to the governing authorities should be broken.

This is a very, very complex issue that will require a great deal more consideration and discernment that I can give it in the few minutes we have here this morning. The reality is sometimes we may find ourselves faced with a command from our governing authorities we feel directly opposes a command we've been given from God.

This happens a number of times in Scripture. In the Old Testament Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to murder any son born to a Hebrew woman. Exodus says that the midwives, however, “feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live,” and then lied to Pharaoh when he demanded to know why they hadn’t slain the baby boys (Ex 1:15-22).

In Acts 4, Peter and John are brought before the leaders of the Jewish people and commanded to stop telling people about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ -- their governing authorities gave them a direct command to cease preaching the Gospel. To this they responded, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (v.19) Peter and John are freed, but later arrested again for their preaching, and Peter tells his accusers “We must obey God rather than men.” (5:29).

There is no doubt that Peter was absolutely right to have made this claim. Our devotion and commitment to God’s will must never be replaced by obedience to a sinful command from our governing authorities.

However, I urge all of you to not take resistance or disobedience to authority lightly. It is interesting that Paul -- a man who at the time of writing this letter had already been beaten and abused several times by order of various authorities -- wrote about subjecting ourselves to authorities and not once thought to raise the question or provide an answer to the question of civil disobedience.

Challenge yourself to embrace his commands...submission to governing authorities as an expression of our submission and devotion to God. Romans 13:1-7 is not about obeying authority when it’s good, or convenient, or when you agree 100% with what’s being asked of you. It’s a call to be a good citizen, to overcome evil by participating in order, to live peaceably in as many ways as you can.

We are to be subject to governing authorities because God has appointed and established all authority. Our willing obedience to those in authority above us is an expression of our submission and devotion to God. We must remember that God is in control, recognize our responsibility to be good citizens, and only when directly commanded to disobey God must we carefully consider, yet rarely invoke, civil disobedience.

### **Application:**

So what can we do? What are some ways that we here, in Manhattan KS can be subject to our governing authorities?

Paul suggests three practices: paying taxes, respecting authority, and honoring authority.

In Romans 13:6-7 we read:

*“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.”*

Paying taxes is pretty clear -- governments need money, governing authorities will make laws requiring citizens pay some of their money to the government...and Paul says we ought to do so. No loopholes here. We're biblically commanded to pay our taxes.

This might mean our money ends up paying for practices and services we object. No doubt the Roman Christians were paying for lots of things they'd have rather not (in a few years they'd be paying for the soldiers Nero sent to hunt them down and execute them). We do need to keep paying our taxes, but we can also get involved in reforming what gets taxed in the hopes that if all more in line with what we understand as good and right, according to the will of God.

Paul also says we ought to give respect and honor to who it's owed -- and in this passage, I think he means respecting and honoring those who hold positions of authority in our government.

There are any number of ways to practice respecting and honoring authority. Be sure to thank police officers and members of our military for their service and dedication to keeping us safe. Be kind, courteous, and even offer words of encouragement to government employees working in places like the Records Office or the DMV. Don't engage in the belittling or insulting of government officials out of spite, anger, and cheap entertainment. Try to remember...each and every member of our government is a human being, and Christ is just as interested in loving them as he is in loving you.

And finally, although he doesn't say it here, Paul and the other New Testament authors remind us repeatedly to pray for all those who are in positions of authority.

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul writes:

*“I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”*

I don't want to tack prayer on to the end of this as a token reminder. I'd like to challenge all of us, myself included, to get serious about praying for our country, our government, and the men and women who carry the burden of leadership. As it is God's desire for us to be citizens characterized by good conduct, so too does he desire for our leaders to be authorities characterized by good leadership -- empowered and uplifted by the prayers of God's people.



There is perhaps no American leader more closely identified with the struggle between godly citizenship and submission to earthly authority than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I'd like to close with an excerpt from one of his sermons on the verses and ideas we've talked about today.

*"We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."*

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for this day and for this opportunity to gather together as your people and learn from your Word. The command to be subject to our earthly governing authorities can be difficult to understand and follow, but I praise you and thank you for the promise that you are behind and above every authority, and that you are always in control.

I ask that your Spirit continue to enlighten us as to the meaning of this passage, and empower us to lovingly and willingly obey your commands. We seek to participate in your plan to overcome evil with good, to love those who hate us, and live God-honoring lives on this earth while we await the return of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.