

The Reign of Grace: Let All be Subject to Governing Authorities

Opening Scripture: Romans 13:1–7

I was able to visit WA, DC a couple of times last year, first with my sons on a graduation trip back to VA, and the second was with the staff pastors and a couple of Elders to a weekend conference at a local Church on Capitol Hill, DC. A visit to the national archives and seeing our hallowed founding documents has a certain effect on you. I have to say I am genuinely grateful to the founding fathers for putting their lives on the line in the forming of this great nation of ours. But then the reality sinks in—here we sit, the political sons and daughters of revolutionaries. Rebels who dared to defy the governing authorities of England.

So, as the beneficiaries of political revolt, how should we, of all people, read a passage like Romans 13:1–7? When Kyle read that passage, did it make it you feel uncomfortable, uneasy? I would venture to say these verses, over the last 3 years, have been the most commented, written on, and deconstructed text in the whole NT due to its relevance to issues like individual rights, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom to protest our government, freedom of religious expression and so on.

So how does Romans 13:1–7 apply in a uniquely United States culture where we have rights that ancient Romans never had?

We're going to get there, but first we have to back to the past—back to Rome's own context.

Several contextual observations about the passage:

First, the passage in the context of Christian worship—Paul's instructions to offer acceptable acts of service to God is now extended into our civic life and our relationship with governing authorities. It pleases God for Christians to seek peace, pursue justice, and to stay out of trouble with the governing authorities.

Second, Paul anticipates the growing animosity of rival sects and the need of believers to exhibit "bullet-proof" moral lives.

(1) Claudius' expulsion of the Jews (AD 50?) a few years earlier for riots and civil unrest in opposition to the preaching of Christians about Christ. By the writing of Romans, they've been allowed back now, and the Jewish Christian population is rejoining the Church, hence Paul's many instructions to them in this book.

(2) Nero's scapegoating of Christians for setting the great fire of Rome (AD 64). In a few short years, Roman Christians will be blamed for burning down the slums in the city. Nero rounded up Christians, burned them, fed them to the lions in the colosseum, and burned their carcasses as torches for dinner parties. In the face of many false accusations and slanders, Christians in this world of ancient "fake news" will have to watch their lives and conduct very closely. Avoiding even the appearance of law-breaking due to the

Third, Paul presents the ideal situation between people and human government. Ideally, members of the populace would always be law-abiding citizens (and this should be especially true of Christians). Likewise, in idyllic circumstances, human governments would always exercise retributive justice—disapproving of the bad by punishing evil and approving of the good by upholding moral law. But we know in our repeated and uniform experience that this just isn't always true.

Lastly, it should be noted that the gospel tradition is already a strong countercultural movement on several levels:

- (1) The proclamation of the “gospel” of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the gospel of Caesar and the Imperial cult of Caesar worship in the first century. By Paul’s day, the cult of Caesar Augustus had already taken hold.¹ Jesus, as opposed to Caesar, is the world’s true Savior and Lord (Caesar’s titles). He is the true rider on the White Steed, bearing the sash “King of kinglings and Lord of lordlings” (Rev 19). And it is the gospel of Jesus that is the power of God for salvation and true peace—not a counterfeit imperial Roman message. The message itself is already subversive and counter-Imperial.
- (2) The theological commitments of Christians offended Greco-Romans. Being monotheist—the belief in One God who is the infinite, personal, creator of all things was distasteful to the polytheistic world of Rome.
- (3) The religious institution of the Church—it was illegal to “start a new religion.” The aggressive and active practice of converting Jews and Gentile neighbors became problematic as the Church was constantly making inroads into Roman districts and baptizing new members.
- (4) The value system of the gospel in contrast to that of Roman culture. Last week we looked at values like “honoring others”—which stands in direct contrast to the highly competitive, merciless, and brutal culture of social honor-seeking; sexual purity over against promiscuity, and unfettered sexual expression, particularly among men. Generosity versus underhanded scheming and greed. The value system of the gospel directly clashed with and confronted the upside-down world of Roman social ethics. This led some Romans to label Christians as “hateful” due to their condemnation of deviant Roman social and sexual ethics. All of this led one Roman historian to label them “Anti-Roman” and “haters of the human race” (*odium generis humani*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.38–44).

With this already contentious context in mind of contentious relations between the Christian gospel and Caesar’s false gospel—we have to understand the thrust of Paul’s instructions here.

¹ Richard Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Trinity Press International). Evidence from epigraphic and archaeological remains seems quite compelling that there existed a dominant Imperial Cult by the writing of Romans. In which case, Paul and his audience are already in direct violation of a standing gospel to which they were expected to conform.

Main Idea: Paul acknowledges human government as divinely instituted which now calls for believers to submit to governing authorities. Governments have a limited scope of authority—mainly to punish wrongdoing, uphold the good, and provide for the welfare of its citizens. Believers who obey the law should not fear retribution nor God’s judgment.

Human government is divinely instituted by God, and Christians are to, generally, seek to obey governing authorities as an acceptable and pleasing act of worship to God.

1. Earthly authorities are agents of law and order (13:1) “Let everyone submit to the *governing authorities*, since there is *no authority except from God*, and the authorities that exist are *instituted by God.*” **God is the author of human authority and government.** God has mercifully given the rogue nations and peoples of the earth a system of retributive justice to punish wrongdoing.

- **Creation:** God decrees the world into existence “Let there be” and “it was so” is sovereign king language. After issuing a divine law/decreed God then orders the world—everything put into its proper creational order under the Sovereign rule of God.
- **Co-regency:** God then creates human image-bearers who are given a dominion mandate consisting of three phases: (1) be fruitful and multiply over the face of the earth. Spread out. Fill the world with the God-imagined kind. (2) Take dominion over the earth—this happens through the responsible development of God’s arid, empty, uncultivated world and also happens through the domestication of all wildlife. So God will rule this realm through an image-bearer who is His viceroy or co-regent.
- **The Fall:** Not only do God’s original humans fall into sin through disobedience, but their descendants also spiral into moral insanity—such that God deems it necessary to wipe them out, all but the family of Noah. After the flood, God reissues Adam’s vocation “God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ² The fear and terror of you will be in every living creature on the earth, every bird of the sky, every creature that crawls on the ground, and all the fish of the sea. They are placed under your authority. ³ Every creature that lives and moves will be food for you; as I gave the green plants, I have given you everything” (Gen 9:1–3). But this time adding the first principle of human governance—the principle of retributive justice “And I will require a penalty for your lifeblood...if someone murders his fellow human, I will require that person’s life...for God made humans in his image” (Gen 9:5–6). This principle upholds the sanctity of human life and the need for penal justice for taking casually taking that life.
- **The Divorce:** From Noah come the tribal nations of the earth who violate God’s original decree for humans in two significant ways: (1) instead of multiplying and filling the earth with God’s kind developing multiple cultures that bring the earth into subjection to God’s sovereign reign, they coalesce and congregate into one nation, one culture, one language

and they built “up” not “out.” (2) Right here is the beginning of idolatry. These ancient ziggurats have been discovered in Mesopotamia and they are not hollow—there’s not living space in them. They are essentially stairways to heaven. On top of them are all kinds of sacrificial implements—meaning—right here is the start of human idolatry.

- **Human government:** Human government is given a very limited project—maintaining law and order. Bear the sword, punish evil, and deliver justice. This was given as a grace to the nations until the final, enduring, and everlasting Kingdom of God and His Messiah would be set up. But it’s going to take a while. It starts with a covenant promise made to Abraham to raise up from him a nation who will then bless the nations of the earth. The Covenant with Moses in the giving of the Ten Words (Commands)—the greatest moral law system ever given to humankind. The Covenant with David to establish God’s kingdom reign on the earth through another human vice-regent. David’s Son or descendant who will inherit all the promises of Israel, and then bring the nations of the earth into the family of God through forgiveness of sins.
- **The Messiah’s Kingdom:** Now, the Kingdom of God has come, having been inaugurated at Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension. The inbreaking of the Messiah’s reign is a sign to the governments and systems of the world that they are headed on a collision course with God’s rightful and exalted King. That’s where the whole story is headed—to the dissolution and judgment of every kingdom and system of governance on earth.

Earthly governing authorities are established by God to administer law and order.

2. Christians should be good citizens of their country and their Kingdom (13:2–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13–17; Matt 22:15–22; Luke 20:20–26). The Christian who obeys God’s natural law and order faithfully represented in the authority systems of men, live in the fear of God who instituted human authority.

So practically what should this look like? Let me suggest some practical actions based on Paul’s principles here:

- **Obey the law.** Rom 13:2 “So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.” Here’s the general principle: ***we break the laws of God when we break the laws of men that do not require us to break the laws of God.*** Generally, we want a favorable relationship with the governing authorities. And we do this as we model good Christian citizenship by obedience to the laws. Now the example Paul gives here are those prohibitions and prescriptive laws guiding moral conduct like “Don’t steal; don’t murder your neighbor; don’t openly commit extortion (though private manipulation and extortion was expected in Rome to climb the social ladder.” But this principle of obeying the law would also extend into our modern context in terms of the Bill of Rights—and the recognition that in this country we also have the right to protest, to freely assemble, to say what we want to say to our constituencies, to voice our opinions and to own private property—and to protect that property from anyone who would seek to take it from us by force. Again, Paul could not possibly have anticipated our existence and doesn’t address any of these laws. But the principle of obedience and active engagement as good citizens is, I would argue, still present here.
- **Submit to governing authorities as a matter of fear and a good conscience.** Rom 13:5 “Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.” Living in the fear of God means to live under the authority of God and also to expect the consequences for disobeying that authority. But it’s also a matter of good conscience—to keep the inner conscience clear. He mentions the examples of paying taxes, levies, and honor/respect. Taxes in Rome had become an onerous burden such that even Roman citizens and the non-citizenry population were groaning under the excessive taxation. Nero himself even contemplated getting rid of all indirect taxes but then decided not to. Paul sets forth here the need for us to recognize that as citizens we have certain social responsibilities.
- **Love your neighbors.** Rom 13:8–10 “Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, **Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet;**

and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.”

- **Resist sin.** “Rom 13:12–13 “Let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk with decency...” So what if the *laws of a nation require me to break the laws of God?* What if they command me embrace the deeds of darkness and to affirm indecency? The answer is in Acts 4:19 “Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it’s right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; ²⁰ for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.’” (Acts 4:19). There are times when we must submit to God and resist the devil. There are times when it is right and proper to resist those in authority who attempt to deprive us of our God-given responsibility to the Great Commission—and one could argue that the exercise of that authority is predicated on free speech, the right to assemble and teach a biblical worldview, the right to be good protestants and to protest the vile, hateful, and godless corruption of our age. *We said before, we break the laws of God when we break the laws of men that do not require us to break the laws of God. Conversely, when the laws of men require us to break the commands of God, we stand resolute and steadfast—immovable on this Word.*
- **Prepare for the battle.** Eph 6:10–20 “Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens. ¹³ For this reason take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. ¹⁴ Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest, ¹⁵ and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In every situation take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. ²⁰ For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough to speak about it as I should.” Are you prepared for the battle that is ahead on “the day of evil”—that is, when on the day when the evil and wicked systems of men unleash their sinful devices on us? And *are you prepared with the right armaments: standing firm in the truth, reinforced in righteous living, grounded in the gospel of peace, protected by an unshakable faith in Jesus, renewing a saved mind and wielding the power of God’s Word against lies and deception.*

