

Romans 13:1-7

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[0 : 0 0] to share with you some of the things I've been getting through my letterbox, and I'm sure you have also. Lots of very nice people offering to do lovely things for me. Now, these folk here, they're offering a prosperous region, local people in charge, excellence in education.

Well, that's something we would all agree with, I'd imagine. What else? What other promises are we getting? Council tax frees, maintain the 1,000 extra police on our streets. Some of the policemen amongst us will be glad to know that. Now, what else have we got? Well, here we've got one where none other than Alec Ferguson is commending. Now, what do they offer us? Well, they offer us a cut in cancer waiting times, not nurses. Well, who wouldn't agree with that? Again, council tax frees, just for two years. Others are offering five years. Oh, well. And then we have others that I won't dignify with even making reference to, but you've maybe had these ones as well. Anyway, before I get into hot water by revealing my own political sympathies. But these are the leaflets and the literature that we've all been receiving as our vote is sought for the elections that are just around the corner. And they all seem so nice, so agreeable. They all seem to want to do the right thing. I had one fellow actually come to my door. Most of these things just come through the letterbox. But one very idealistic looking young man came and knocked on the door door. And he asked me if I would consider voting. And he named the political party in question, which I won't name at this point. And I replied, I intend to. Now, I don't know why. It's the house

I live in or the face I've got. But he was very surprised that I was going to vote in that particular direction. Well, that's very cryptic and you can try and work out for yourself what the party was.

He was seeking to secure my allegiance to. And I assured him that I was already decided on that matter. Anyway, in a couple of weeks there are elections that will determine who will govern in Scotland, certainly as regards the powers that are delegated to the Scottish Parliament. And we all have to decide how we are going to cast our vote. And I wonder if there's any help in the Bible to direct us. And even posing that question, I'm conscious, is entering into potentially dangerous ground as to what we can legitimately draw from the Bible as directing or informing us as to this matter.

Is there such a thing as a Christian way to vote? Now, I will stress at the very beginning that it's not my intention at all this evening to point in any particular direction as to how you may choose to cast your vote. But rather what I want to do is to identify some foundational principles concerning government itself, concerning the very existence of the civil magistrate or governing authorities.

[3 : 2 7] Now, the classic passage where this is dealt with is in Romans chapter 13. And I am not going to be particularly original by seeking the principles that we want to identify elsewhere, but rather go to that passage in Romans chapter 13 and verses 1 to 7, where Paul very explicitly deals with the matter concerning the governing authorities and our relationship to them as citizens, as those who are under their authority.

So, let's read the passage and then, having read it, seek to identify some basic principles that we do find presented there by the apostle Paul. So, Romans chapter 13, reading from the beginning and through to verse 7.

We read, Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right, and he will commend you.

For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

[5 : 21] Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants who give their full time to governing.

Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honor, then honor.

The Word of God. Now, Paul here makes three basic points. Or in any case, there are three basic points that I want to draw from this passage concerning this matter of the governing authorities as the language of the passage, or the language used by the passage, the governing authorities.

Three points. The first one, and we'll develop each in turn, but I'll mention what they are first of all. The first one is the establishment of governing authorities. He informs us concerning the establishment of governing authorities.

We'll see what he says about that, but that's the first thing. The second thing that he identifies is the role of governing authorities. What are they to do?

[6 : 42] What are they there for? Why have they been established? To do what? Paul addresses that. Not exhaustively, not in precise detail.

He doesn't set out some kind of detailed agenda as to the role of government, but he does identify two basic fundamental functions of government, and we will notice in a moment what they are.

And then finally, he also instructs us concerning our responsibility towards governing authorities. We as citizens, how are we to respond to?

What is our duty towards those who govern? So those three points we're going to notice and consider in the light of this passage.

First of all then, the establishment of government. The first thing that we can say, it's a very basic point, very clearly expressed in the first verse, but that needs to be made, is that governing authorities have been established by God.

[7 : 53] They are established by God. It couldn't be clearer there in the first verse of the chapter, everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

And for the avoidance of any doubt, as if perhaps some of his readers would be trying to find some wriggle room, he then goes on to say, the authorities that exist have been established by God.

You couldn't get clearer language if you tried to find it. So, in relation to this matter of the establishment of government, Paul makes it very clear that government has been established by God, expressly instituted and commanded by God, not simply a matter of circumstance, that circumstance requires that there be government in order to order society and order human community.

That's true. It's much less, is it a question of unnecessary evil? Well, it's something we've got to have, because if we didn't have it, well, all would be chaos. No, what Paul is saying is that God has expressly instituted the governing authorities.

Now, we can go further than that, or we can explain that in greater detail by saying that not only is Paul saying that God has established, in theory as it were, the principle of government.

[9 : 36] That's true. God has established that human society should be ordered by those who govern, or that there should be government over those who live in human society, as a general principle.

But Paul says more than that. Paul actually says, or what he states very clearly, is that actual governments have been established by God. Not just the principle of government, but those who are actually governing.

So, for example, to put some flesh onto the bones, it is by God's establishing that David Cameron is the prime minister. It is by God's establishing that Alex Salmond is the first minister.

That is no value judgment on the merit or otherwise of these men, on how wise they might be or otherwise. It's simply recognizing that this is what Paul is stating.

When he wrote the letter, he was writing to Christians in Rome, and he was writing in the context of the Roman emperor as the one who exercised authority.

[10 : 43] And he is saying that that actual government has been established by God. So, not simply the principle that there should be government, but those who are actually governing have been established by God.

Now, what we can say further in that regard, and in a sense it's simply following on logically from what we've said already, is that necessarily that leads us to the conclusion, I think a reasonable conclusion, that all governments, regardless of their shape or size or the manner in which they govern, regardless of how they got to power, all those who are in authority, de facto governments, enjoy this divine establishment.

The language that Paul uses, I don't think, allows for any misinterpretation. What does he say there in the second half of verse 1?

The authorities that exist have been established by God. He doesn't say the good authorities. He doesn't say those who govern wisely or effectively or in a godly way.

No, the authorities that exist, period. Good, bad, and indifferent, they have been established by God. In the case of the authorities that were current when he was writing this letter, certainly the authority that they enjoyed over, for example, Palestine and Jerusalem, it had been achieved by violent means, by conquest.

[12 : 20] And that is something that could rightly be criticized and questioned in terms of the morality of it. But Paul says regardless of that, there is a de facto authority, and that authority in his case was the Roman Empire and the emperor himself particularly, and his authority is one that had been established by God.

So, claims and states Paul very clearly. Paul isn't interested in this chapter. I'm not saying he has no interest in it at all.

He may have done, he may not have done, I don't know. But it's not his concern in this chapter to consider forms of government, and which form may be more suitable, or a better form as opposed to a worse form of government.

That's a legitimate debate that can be had. And I would suggest that there are biblical principles that could allow us to weigh the relative merits of different forms of government.

No doubt there are. But that is not Paul's concern, to compare and contrast and say, well, monarchy is better than a dictator, or democracy is better, or whatever.

[13 : 37] That's not a debate he was interested in. That wasn't his concern. It's been said by somebody, and I can't quite remember who it was, that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others.

Now, I don't know if you have any sympathy for that point of view, but the issue here is that that isn't Paul's concern, to weigh the merits or otherwise of any particular form of government.

He simply makes the point very clearly that whatever the government is, whatever form it takes, if it is the de facto authority, then it has been established by God.

But there's a second thing we can say still considering this matter that the authorities have been established by God, or this matter of the establishment of authorities, first of all established by God, but also, and it follows on from that first point, is that those who govern, govern under God.

If God has established them, if God is the one who has determined that they be where they are, exercising the government that they exercise, then they are necessarily under God.

[14 : 50] God has established them, and it is to God they must answer. And of course, this is true regardless of whether they recognize that to be so. Now, we live in a day when perhaps many of those who exercise authority in our country would think it a bizarre notion that they are answerable to God.

They would either politely reject such a suggestion or perhaps openly scoff at such a suggestion, but whether they accept it or not is really a matter indifferent.

It's the way it is. They are answerable to God, whether they like it or not, whether they accept it or not. God is the one who has established them, and so necessarily they are answerable to Him.

Indeed, the language that Paul uses, it's almost surprising language, considering that he is writing to Christians in Rome who are very aware of the excesses of the emperor and the violence of the emperor and the injustice often of the emperor.

What is the language Paul uses to describe these authorities? Well, he says they are God's servants. He uses that language on two or three occasions just in these few verses.

[16 : 02] In verse 4, he is God's servant to do you good. In verse 6, the authorities are God's servants. Now, a servant we know is answerable to his master.

Now, this truth also places a limit on their power. Yes, they have been established by God. They enjoy authority. And, you know, at first sight you might say, well, that almost gives them greater authority.

They can claim divine sanction for the place that they occupy. Well, yes, but the fact that God has established them also places a limit on their power.

Certainly it places a limit on what could be described as legitimate power. They are servants. Now, a servant cannot do, certainly must not do, ought not to do, that which is not agreeable to his master.

A servant must do his master's bidding. That is his role. It's not for a servant to go beyond or certainly or even less so against the wishes and the instructions of his master.

[17 : 11] Now, a servant may do so. And in this particular instance of the governing authorities in our own land and in many other lands often do go against the master's instructions.

But in so doing, the action that they take is incompetent, literally incompetent. They are going against the role that they have.

God has placed them there. He is their master. They must govern according to God's instructions. When they go beyond what God approves, when they go beyond what God instructs, then their actions are, in a very real sense, illegitimate.

So, as we consider this matter of the establishment of the authorities, they are established by God. Those who are so established govern under God.

And then finally, under this point, those who govern, govern for the people. So, it seems to me reasonable to apply the language of servant that, in fairness, Paul is using particularly to describe the relationship of the authority to God.

[18 : 21] That is his primary concern. They are servants of God. And I recognize that that's the primary intent of the language. However, I think it is reasonable, certainly in the context of the overall teaching of Scripture, to use that language as applying to their responsibility towards the people that they govern.

They are to serve those whom they govern. They are placed for the good of those who they govern. More of that in a moment. Indeed, in our own language, we use the language of servants.

We speak of public servants. We maybe don't grasp, or those in such office perhaps are reluctant to recognize the implications of that, but we do use that language even in our ordinary conversation.

And that certainly would seem to be warranted by the teaching that we have here by the Apostle Paul. And in their serving of the people, those who govern, just as it is the case, as is clearly stated in verse 1, that everyone must submit to the authorities.

So, the other side of the coin also is valid that in their exercising of government, they must be concerned for everyone who is subject to them.

[19 : 46] Not to govern, to favor one particular group that maybe they represent. We know what it's like, and we don't need to go far afield for this, but the example that comes immediately to mind is of the conflicts that there are in different countries in the Middle East.

And we hear of the different strands within the Muslim religion and Sunnis and Shias. And so, you hear that there is a Sunni government, and their concern is really to favor their own, and the Shias are unhappy, or the governor is a Shia Muslim, and so the Sunnis feel that they're being left out.

Why? Because the governor there, it would appear, is concerned not with serving all, but simply those who are of his inner circle, or of his tribe, or of his particular brand of religion.

That is not what is the intention of God, as indicated here by the teaching of the Apostle Paul. So, that is what we can say concerning the establishment of government.

Established by God, the governor is consequently under the authority of God and responsible to God, and they are to govern for the people who are subject to them.

[20 : 58] But moving swiftly on to the second point that we want to notice from what Paul says here, and that is the role of government. Okay, God has established government, not only in theory, but in the real world.

He establishes those who govern in our own land and in every land. But what are governments to do? What are their duties and responsibilities? Now, here we do enter into the realm of different political philosophies.

Some are for big government, and some are for small government. Some just are repulsed by what they see as the nanny state, and others have different views, no doubt among ourselves, different views are held.

Well, without getting into great detail, I think we can identify two core duties of government, stated here, presented here by Paul. The first of these, as we'll see in a moment, is sufficiently broad in the way it can be understood to perhaps accommodate different understandings that we might have of the role of government.

But let's see what they are, and then we can consider what the implications are. The first role of government identified here by Paul is found in verse 4. We read there in verse 4, He is God's servant to do you good.

[22 : 21] He is to do good to those He governs. That is His function. That is the function, to do good. Well, that's easy enough to identify, but what does that mean?

Well, it's variously understood, as perhaps ought not to surprise us. We can understand it in a very narrow way, I suppose, by seeing what has been said immediately before in verse 3.

We read there in the second half of verse 3, Then do what is right, and He will commend you, for He is God's servant to do you good. And certainly what is said there in verse 4 does appear to be following on from what has been said at the end of verse 3.

And so there we could say that the to do you good is related to commending those who are good citizens, commending those who are law-abiding, commending those who do that which they are required to do.

And government should recognize that. The authorities should commend, perhaps even reward those who are upstanding, law-abiding citizens, however they may choose to do that.

[23 : 30] I would say that's a narrow way, a legitimate way, but a narrow way of understanding this first role of government to do good. The second way in which it can be understood, and these aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, is one that requires us to look further afield from what we have here in Romans 13 to what Paul himself says on another occasion in 1 Timothy chapter 2.

And we'll just read what he says and then tie it in with the question that we're addressing, which is what does it mean to identify the role of government to do good to the citizens of a given jurisdiction?

Well, 1 Timothy chapter 2 and verses 1 and 2, what does Paul say here? The same Paul, speaking to Timothy, he says, Paul's concern is that we be able to live peaceful and quiet lives.

And he recognizes that for that to happen, it's necessary that the authorities be performing their functions, that the authorities have as a duty to secure the conditions for peaceful living, for our security.

Now, there is where we can perhaps seek to interpret that or apply that. In what way or to what extent are the authorities to secure the conditions for peaceful and quiet living?

[25 : 09] Well, certainly our physical security, that we would be safe. You could go further and speak of our fiscal security, of financial security, of legal security, an understandable and consistent legal framework in which to live.

Some might argue that here we could speak about the provision of basic infrastructure, sanitary infrastructure, transport infrastructure, that it would allow us to live peaceful and quiet lives, to get from A to B, to go about our business, to do that which we need to do.

These are areas that you could legitimately argue are covered by, or in any case are suggested by, this first role of government as identified by Paul.

He is God's servant to do you good. Some might want to go further and say that to do good to the citizens of the nation, it could involve the provision of basic services, health services, education services, a safety net for those who are poor and disadvantaged in one way or another.

Some might wish to go that further step in understanding or interpreting this statement of Paul, that he is God's servant to do you good. I leave it to yourselves to see how far it would be legitimate to go on the basis of this statement of Paul.

[26 : 36] In any case, that's the first role identified by Paul of the governing authorities, to do you good, to do the citizens good. But there's a second one, and that is very clearly stated, and indeed Paul occupies more time on it, and that is that he is, to use the language of Paul, an agent of wrath.

Now the language sounds very dramatic and almost quite quaint and old-fashioned, an agent of wrath. What are we to make of this?

Well, clearly Paul is speaking of the duty of government in relation to law and order, and the punishment of wrongdoing. He is an agent of wrath.

He is and has as his responsibility to punish those who do wrong. There's many things that could be said here, and we're going to have to just very briefly and fleetingly say one or two.

The first thing to say is a very basic one, but an important one, that Paul is stating very clearly that wrongdoing must be punished, that that is what God requires.

[27 : 41] It must be punished. Indeed, he says that the punishment that the authorities will place on somebody is in fact God's punishment being given through the authorities.

They are agents of wrath. It's not even their own wrath. It is the wrath of God against the wrongdoer, being punished by the instrumentality of the authorities that God has established.

The punishment is for those who do wrong. And while time doesn't allow, nor would it be wise to delve too deeply into this, I think it is important to stress that punishment is for doing wrong, for wrong actions.

Not for thought crimes, not for thinking the wrong way, not for having ideas that are different from those who are in authority, but for wrong actions. What those wrong actions are is another matter altogether, and certainly we would argue that it should be grounded in the moral law as presented to us and as we've even been considering in these past weeks.

Wrongdoing is to be punished. It is God's punishment that the authorities are giving to those who do wrong. The implication, the clear implication that this involves and requires a recognized penal and civil code that establishes what constitutes wrongdoing.

[29 : 13] Now, there again, there's much that would need to be said. One thing I would say is that we do need to draw a distinction between what is illegal and what is immoral. There may be what is immoral is a much broader thing than that which would be illegal.

Now, how you determine what that is immoral should be illegal, that's another matter altogether, but that there is a distinction there surely must be.

Paul also hints at the nature of the punishment, but we're not going to go down that road purely for reasons of time, but he does speak of the authorities carrying the sword, being given the sword to exercise this function.

We made reference to that just a couple of weeks ago in another context. Two specific roles then of government. First of all, to do good, and secondly, to punish those who do wrong, the wrong doer.

Finally, and briefly, our responsibility towards government. Well, in verse 1 it's very clear. Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.

[30 : 19] That submission involves recognition that their authority is one that has been granted by God. It involves respect for them. We may disagree with them.

We may be very opposed to what they believe and what they are doing, but there is a duty of respect that we have towards them. In this matter of submission, there is a why and a how.

And this is the final thing I want us to notice. There is a why and a how, and they're both governed by a fundamental principle identified by Paul in the language that he uses there in verse 7.

Sorry, in verse 5. This question of conscience informs the why and the how of our submission.

First of all, the why of our submission. Conscience informs that in this sense, and Paul makes it very clear, that we submit because it is the right thing to do. Not simply because they could punish us, though indeed they can, and would it be in their rights to punish us if we do what is wrong.

[31 : 32] But we submit not only because of that, but because it's the right thing to do. Out of conscience. It is the right thing to do. This is Paul's point. So conscience informs the why of submission, but it also informs the how of submission.

Conscience dictates that because it's the right thing to do, we must respect them, we must honor them, we must obey them within their area of authority, we must pay taxes as are required of us, even when we may disagree with the manner in which those resources are used.

So conscience dictates the how of our submitting to them, but, and with this we close, conscience also demands that our submission is a qualified submission.

Conscience demands that on occasion we do not submit to the authorities. When are we not to submit to the authorities? Well, we've already read of Daniel and how he did not submit to the authorities that he was under.

We've read what the apostles have said concerning obeying God rather than man. And the manner in which this is generally being presented is that we are not to submit to the authorities when they require what God forbids and when they forbid what God requires.

[32 : 54] And again, that could be developed in many ways, but we must limit ourselves simply to making the point. In those circumstances, we are duty-bound to a higher authority, indeed to the authority that has established these earthly authorities.

And when they go beyond their level of competence by requiring us to do what God forbids, then we must disobey them. Or when they forbid us to do what God requires, there also we must disobey the authorities.

Yes, even though they have been established by God. So there are some principles, and it will be very clear even in this attempt to do justice to some of the principles that there is so much more that could be said and perhaps needs to be said in the developing of them.

But we conclude simply by reminding ourselves of these three basic points, that governing authorities, those for whom we will be voting in a couple of weeks, are established by God and so also answerable to God.

The role that government has, two very specific or certainly very clear areas of responsibility to do good to those they govern over and to punish wrongdoing.

[34 : 15] And then finally, we as citizens, what is our responsibility to government? Well, it is to submit to the government that God has established over us, even when, and perhaps especially when, we may be very disinclined to do so and very much against what they stand for or indeed the manner in which they govern.

Well, I hope some of these things could help us or in any case inform us, even as we consider how we are going to exercise our responsibility in the matter of electing those who will have responsibility in this area, in our own nation.

Well, let's pray.