



Does everyone know what this is? Yes, it's an air filter for your home. We are a full service church so we wanted to remind you to please change your filters today! Just kidding. I bring this out to remind us that we all have filters, ways we process information. Your mind has a filter. Depending on how you were raised, where you went to school, experiences, jobs, books you've read, and many other things, all have become a filter for how you think about things. We all filter information. Sometimes what I say is not what you hear. Sometimes what you hear is not what I said. We all do this.

So, here is what I want you to do. Take your mental filters and set them aside for next 30 minutes. After the sermon, you can pick up your filters on the way out. All I want to do today is preach this passage from Romans 13 about submitting to the government. I have no hidden agendas. I'm not trying to give you a subtle message about how to vote in this primary. I'm not secretly saying anything about the Affordable Care Act or any Supreme Court decisions either. This means I need you to set aside your CNN and Foxnews filters, Republican and Democratic filters too. What most of us have in common here today is we are followers of Jesus, which means we have a better filter.

In Romans 12 Paul has covered four basic Christian relationships: our relationship with God, with ourselves, with one another, and with our enemies. Here in Romans 13 Paul describes another relationship: our relationship with the state, our government. You need to know, Paul is not giving a lecture on church-state relations. He's not addressing the hundred and one questions we all have about those issues. Instead, he's instructing Christians about our personal citizenship. What does it mean to be a Christian citizen? As a follower of Jesus, how do we love God and our country as a citizen within it? He's going to say some surprising things. Let's look at his first point in verse 1.

### **All Authority is Established by God**

**Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God (v. 1).**

Paul is making a massive claim here—all authority is established by God. It was radical in his day and in ours. Because all authority is established by God, as followers of Jesus, we are asked to submit to it. Submitting to authority is submitting to God. Whether we like it or not, it seems to me that the great

apostle Paul was pro-government. In his thinking, the role of the government was an institution invented by God. God has “established it,” he says. That means the state is a divine institution with divine authority. As a Jewish thinker, Paul might have had on his mind Daniel 4:17b that says, *“the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.”* That means God is in control of **all** nations and rulers. I know this is hard to swallow, but a good case can be made that every ruler, even evil ones, have been appointed by God, although this doesn't mean he's responsible for their behavior.

We need to remember the kind of world and culture Paul was writing this letter in. Both Roman and Jewish authorities were extremely unfriendly and even hostile to the church of God. There were **no** Christian authorities at all in government. Can you imagine being a Roman Christian and the apostle Paul saying, “By the way, this nation, this country, this system that hates you, God established it. The Rome that has thrown you into lions dens and burned you alive has been established by God and you need to submit to it.” Can you imagine how they felt? It's sort of like what some of you feel now. You look at what's happening politically and in your mind there is no way God could be responsible for any of it.

But, in history and in our own lives, God works through authorities. And often times, we have no idea what he is doing. Think about this—God allowed Rome to crucify his own Son. Yet, we know it was all according to God's plan. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, we wouldn't have Christianity. So, we have our salvation today because God used a pagan, unbelieving government to accomplish his will.

In his book *Up with Authority*, Victor Lee Austin uses the analogy of an orchestra to explain why we need human authority. Orchestras need conductors because the musicians don't have a single right answer to questions like, “What should we play at the concert?” or “What should we practice today?” or “How should we interpret this passage?” Each musician might have a perfectly reasonable opinion, but their opinions will inevitably be different and will almost always be incompatible with one another. And it's no good for each musician to do what is right in his or her own ears. It won't do for the brass section to insist on playing a one-musical piece if the strings have chosen to play a completely different piece. If the orchestra is to perform

coherently, if the musicians want to perform music rather than just make noise, somebody has to have authority to decide.

By submitting to the authority of a conductor, individual musicians attain musical expression they could never realize individually or even as a collection of free-wheeling players. Authority is necessary for classical musicians to bring musical fulfillment to others. In the words of Victor Lee Austin, the conductor's authority yields "a greater degree of human flourishing than we would have from the musicians separately or individually." What is true for orchestras is true for human life in general. Paul is telling the Roman church to obey the government like an orchestra obeys the conductor. Paul then gives them a warning about rebelling against authority.

### **Rebelling Against Authority Brings Judgment from God**

**Consequently, whoever 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 you will be commended (verses 2-3).**

Paul is stating a principle we can all take to the bank. When you fight against authorities God has established, you can rest assured, you'll reap judgment. Even when you are right, there will be judgment, there will be consequences. Because all governmental authority comes from God, to resist it is to resist Him. So, when we rebel against authority, we are essentially rebelling against God. The word for rebelling used here means a persistent resistance or resistance in principle. It's not merely a one-time act. Since we live in a fallen world, God has ordained some form of government (no particular form of government) to bring order to a society and to protect that society from evil forces within and without, and to promote God's concern for justice, goodness, beauty, compassion and peace. All this to say, we don't always appreciate the CHP and his radar gun, but would any of us feel safe on the 280 with no speed limits and no law enforcement? We may resent paying taxes, but do we really think people would contribute to the common good and help the poor if it were optional? Truth is, we need the government. So, if rebelling against authority brings judgment from God, then obeying authority brings protection through God. That's what Paul says next in verses 4-7.

### **Obeying Authority Brings Protection through God**

**For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit**

**to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.**

**This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (verses 4-7).**

Paul tells us three times how the state has authority from God and then he tells us three times how the state also has a ministry from God. He says the state is supposed to do three things: do good, punish those who do wrong, and be God's servants. Paul then ends this section with an illustration about how we are to submit to the state financially by paying our taxes.

The state was established by God to do good and punish evil. That means those in government and in authority are supposed to work for the common good. The state is to promote and reward the good and restrain and punish evil. Paul doesn't say anything about what kind of punishment the state should employ, but at a minimum, his use of the word sword carries with it the idea of death. I'm not saying Paul endorses capital punishment, but he could be. If you remember last week, I said that love does not seek revenge. Here in chapter 13 we are given another reason why we shouldn't take revenge and leave room for God's wrath because it's the state's role to punish evil.

The state should do good and punish evil. Paul also says they are God's servants. In Paul's thinking, those who serve the state as law makers, civil servants, police, firefighters, social workers, and even tax-collectors are all "God's servants" whether they know it or not. That means they are in authority because God put them there to do good (what God calls good) and punish evil (what God calls evil). But, a servant is not free to do whatever they want. Servants serve their master and do his bidding. They seek to please and honor him. God has told us what is good. The Prophet Micah said, "*He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*" (Micah 6:8). That's what God wants from those in authority.

We submit to authority not only to because we don't want to be punished but "as a matter of conscience." That's what Paul says in verse 5. When we don't submit to authority, our conscience gets hardened. When Paul was on trial before Felix he said, "*So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man*" (Acts 24:6). On the one hand we must obey the state because our motivation is obedience to God. On the other hand, we can never submit uncritically to what the state tells us. We can show respect and honor even as we completely disagree with a decision. This means that our role as followers of Jesus is constantly evaluating the state and its policies. Martin Luther King Jr., who knew more about any of this once said, "The church must be

reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

Paul concludes this section by talking about taxes. He says it is the right of government to levy taxes and the obligation of its citizens to pay them. Even Jesus paid taxes and told us to do the same (Matt. 22:15-22). You should know that in that day, Christians didn't like paying taxes either. Rome used taxes to build pagan temples and do other things that offended God. Taxes were even used to help persecute Christians! But, Paul's saying, you're not paying taxes because they are fair, you're paying taxes because Rome asked you to. That means we are not responsible for what the state does with the money; we are only responsible for submitting to the authorities God has established. The reason we pay taxes in America is not because we agree with everything the government does with our money. Far from it! We pay taxes because the IRS is one of the authorities God has placed over us. The left and the right disagree on the size of government and how much people should be taxed. But, I think we all agree that there are some services the state must provide for and to pay for these makes taxes necessary. Hopefully you all filed on Friday or got an extension!

### **When Do We Submit? When Do We Disobey?**

The question many of you are thinking is, what does it mean to "be subject" to the government? Does this mean we obey everything they say and endorse everything they do? I'm not saying that and neither is Paul. Authority is never absolute, expect God's! The biblical teaching on the state shows us both how to submit and when to disobey. The Bible teaches both submission to authority and what we call civil disobedience. So, let me be clear, not every decree of government is necessarily a divine ordinance. Just because something is legal doesn't make it moral either. And God is not responsible for the behavior of all politicians. Biblically, we are to submit right up until the point where obedience to the state would mean disobedience to God. As Peter told the Jewish High Council, "***We must obey God rather than men***" (Acts 5:29).

On the one hand, there are many examples of believers courageously disobeying authority when it required disobedience to God. When Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn boys, they refused to obey. But, they still lived with fear under Pharaoh's heavy hand. When King Nebuchadnezzar forced everyone to bow down and worship his golden image, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said, "Not us!" But, they were still thrown in the lion's den! Thankfully, God protected them. Daniel refused to pray King Darius and he too got thrown into the lion's den. Again, God protected him. When the Jewish High Court banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles all refused to obey. But, most of them died a martyr's death. In each case, rebelling against the state was costly. There was great

personal risk at stake. But, those men and women chose to obey God and not men.

On the other hand, there are several examples of believers obeying authority and working within an oppressive regime. These believers submitted to and even supported civil authorities that disobeyed God and punished the good. For example, Joseph rose to power in Egypt and miraculously became the Prime Minister of Egypt and Pharaoh's right hand man. God worked through Joseph and used him to save the entire Jewish race from famine. And yet Joseph remained faithful to God and to Pharaoh. The Prophet Jeremiah counseled Judah to surrender itself to a cruel and pagan Babylonian power. For 50 years, the Jewish people would remain in captivity in Babylon. But, Jeremiah knew it was all part of God's plan to restore his people who constantly rejected Him. And we know how even the Apostle Paul respected the Roman government and told Christians to obey it, even though Rome supported behavior that was disobedient to God. Jesus himself understood this reality as he stood trial under Pilate and told him, "***You would have no power (authority) over me if it were not given to you from above***" (John 19:11). Jesus, in an instant, could have made all his problems go away, but he chose to submit, even unto death. So, there is a time to submit and a time to disobey. May God give us the wisdom to know the difference.

Let me summarize the logic and flow of Paul's thinking: All authority is established by God. Because all governmental authority comes from God, all Christians are to live in subjection to it. This means rebelling against authority brings judgment from God. To resist it is to resist Him. On the other hand, obeying authority brings protection through God. That means submitting to authority will allow God to direct and protect our lives.

So what does all this mean and how is it relevant for our lives today? Great question because this is not one of those make-you-feel-good sermons!

The Bible identifies three institutions that God has established to push back evil and promote human flourishing: the nuclear family, the church, and the government. All three institutions have different and unique roles. If you are a follower of Jesus, that means that we have different responsibilities to both God and the state. Our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ, first and foremost. We are in many ways dual citizens—citizens of this world and citizens of God's kingdom. But, if we take our calling to love people as Romans 12 outlines and our calling to support the government as Paul says in Romans 13, what should happen is those in authority will begin to see Christians as an asset to society, not a pariah. As we truly love people, seek mercy and justice, and serve people for the common good, history shows us we'll make an incredible impact on our world. If the people

of God, the church took Romans 12 and 13 seriously, that would even force certain parts of the government to become unnecessary. For example, in San Mateo County there are 352 children in the foster care system. What if every Christian on the Peninsula worked together to find those kids loving families? That's so doable! Isn't the church supposed to defend the weak, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and practice hospitality to those on the margins? This is how Christianity transformed Rome and how it can transform our society.

I want to end by giving you a real life application of this from one of our own. Paul Seto and his family attend CPC North and Paul is the former Mayor of Millbrae. Please welcome him to the stage.

*[Interview of Paul Seto]*

"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who though most of the next...The conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this." -- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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