

“A Call to Submission”
Romans 13:1-10
April 29, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

What would life be like if every day you could do exactly as you wanted? If you wanted to sleep in, you could do so. If you wanted to play golf all day, or all week, or all month, no one would be around to tell you you couldn't do that. If you wanted to take a European vacation, you could do so. If you didn't want to deal with the hassles of commercial flights, you would have enough money to take your own private jet. And if you didn't want to do something, you wouldn't have to. No undesirable task would ever have to appear on your “To-do” list. You could have a job if you wanted one, but if it got tiresome and bothersome, you could just quit.

You will know that you are beginning to see things as the Bible sees them when you understand that such a life is much closer to hell than to heaven. We saw in Romans 1 that one of the ways God brings judgment on people is to give them what they want. He turns them over to do what they want, and since their desires are ungodly at a root level, they want to do the wrong things. It's like turning a horse loose in the room where his grain is stored. A horse in such a situation will eat himself to death. The kind of life God commands, the kind that brings life instead of death, is one of humble submission. It is just such a life that is described in the verses of this chapter, where we are told to submit to the civil authorities and to the law of God.

I. Submission to Civil Law

This is the most extensive passage in the New Testament on the relevant topic of the relationship between Church and State. John Stott summarizes four main models for this relationship. “Erastianism (the state controls the church), theocracy (the church controls the state), Constantinianism (the compromise in which the state favours the church and the church accommodates to the state in order to retain its favour), and partnership (church and state recognize and encourage each other's distinct God-given responsibilities in a spirit of constructive collaboration)” (p. 339). Paul's words, together with Jesus' famous saying—“Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's” (Mk. 12:17)—suggest that the partnership view is the correct one. Both the State and the Church are instituted of God for different purposes.

The Christian's duty to the State could not be more clearly stated than it is in verse 1. **“Let every person** [including every Christian] **be subject to the**

governing authorities.” Then he gives us a reason for doing so. **“For there is no authority except from God.”** In other words, governments are instituted by God. The implication is stated explicitly: **“Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed”** (v. 2). Did Paul mean to offer an exception to this? Did he mean to understand that there was at least a minimum standard of justice to be maintained before we could say that this particular civil authority was appointed by God? What about the Roman and Jewish authorities of Paul’s day? The Roman emperors were not friendly to Christianity. Christians were called “atheists” in this day because they refused to worship the Roman Caesar as god. Consequently, the Christians were persecuted, with many losing their lives. And what about civil rulers in more modern times: Hitler, Stalin and Saddam Hussein. Are Christians called upon to submit to these brutal and unjust tyrants? Are they also appointed of God?

When the rest of the Bible is consulted on these questions, two facts emerge. First, even the most unjust ruler is appointed by God. Remember what Jesus said to the Roman governor, Pilate, just before Pilate committed the greatest injustice in human history. **“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above”** (John 19:11). Second, we are called to civil disobedience only when the state asks us to do something God forbids or forbids something God requires. When Nebuchadnezzar required Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to bow before his statue, they engaged in civil disobedience because he was requiring something God had forbidden. And when the Jewish leaders commanded Peter and the apostles to stop teaching in the name of Jesus, they said, **“We must obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29). The case for civil disobedience is implied in the reason given for our submission to the civil authorities. Verse 2 indicates that resistance of civil authorities is to resist God. In other words, when we as Christians submit to the governing authorities, we are doing so as unto God. As we pay our taxes and obey the laws of our land, we are to say in our hearts, “God, this is for you. I am doing this because you have me asked me to do so.” Since Jesus is Lord of all and our obedience to the government is for his sake, when the government asks something that God forbids or forbids something God requires, not only are we allowed to engage in civil disobedience, but we are required to do so.

Since this is such a significant scriptural passage on this topic, let me point out three other things it teaches us. It teaches us something about government, about God and about our duty. First, it teaches something about the duty of civil government. Paul says that the ruler, and the government he represents, is to do two things. He is **“God’s servant for your good”** (v. 4), and he is **“an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer”** (v. 4). There is enough here to anger both conservatives and liberals. Conservatives emphasize the role of government in punishing the evildoer, whether that evildoer is a criminal or an attacking nation, but don’t want the government involved in things that promote the common good. But Paul says they do indeed have such a role of promoting the common good, which could include

things like public education and certain social programs. Liberals, on the other hand, emphasize the government's role in promoting the common good, but grow suspicious of a government that has too much power to punish evildoers. Paul says that the government, unlike the Church, is given the power of the sword (v. 4). This is almost certainly a reference to capital punishment. Though individual Christians are never to repay evil for evil, the government is required to do so. And if they fail in this duty, the result would be anarchy and harm to all. Our civil government is a gift from God, which allows for relative stability in the midst of a fallen and broken world.

This teaches us something important about God. He is able to draw a straight line with a crooked stick. God is able to bring good things even through evil and selfish rulers. Not only do our rulers not have to be perfect in order to be God's instrument for good, they can be very far removed from perfection and still bring good. Remember that when Paul wrote these words there were no Christian rulers. Fresh in the memory of the early Christians were the evil acts of Pilate. Yet even there, God drew a straight line. It was through Pilate's evil deed in agreeing to have an innocent man put to death for political expediency that salvation has come to us through Jesus' death.

Now we're better able to understand our duty, which Paul summarizes in verses 6-7. We are to have hearts of humble submission to the authorities God has instituted throughout every area of our lives. Submit to the government and pay your taxes. Give what you owe—respect where that is owed and honor where that is owed. And we are to do this not because they are worthy of it, but because God asks us to do so. We give respect and honor for Jesus' sake. We do so knowing that our God is big enough to draw a straight line for our lives with the very crooked stick of those in authority over us. So we are to pay our taxes even though we may be of the conviction that some of the money is misspent. We are to respect police officers because God asks us to do so, and he is able to use them to bring peace and stability to our community even though some may be overly impressed with their power. And we are to respect our bosses at work, our teachers at school, our coaches of our sports teams and our state legislators even when they are being exposed for some dishonesty and incompetence. We are to resist the cynical spirit of our age that writes people off when their deficiencies are revealed.

Illustration: I thought of an example of this in the construction of our church addition. When I learned that we would be required to provide fire sprinkling not only for the area of new construction, but also for our existing building, I was not pleased. I knew it would add significantly to our costs, and it seemed unfair to me. The reason fire sprinkling is required by the local jurisdiction is for personal safety. Though it also provides for the protection of property, it is required because it protects people's lives. But I reasoned that by adding an additional exit to our sanctuary, we were increasing personal safety by this addition. To be required to spend all this

money to add fire sprinkling seemed to me to be a waste. But God calls us to submit. I could do so for three reasons. First, God has asked me to. Second, I realize that I might be wrong in my opinion that this is unnecessary. Third, even if I am right and it is unnecessary, God is able to draw a straight line with a crooked stick. He has good things he is able to bring to his children through the most tyrannical of rulers.

It would be a good thing to pause for an application before moving on. Perhaps you're in a situation of needing to give honor, respect and submission to someone who doesn't deserve it. You need to see this as something you give as unto the Lord. The God who brought the greatest blessing of all through Pilate's evil deed is able to bring good into your life through the boss, coach or teacher under whose authority you find yourself. Because Jesus asks you to, give to him or her honor and respect, trusting that God can use them for his good purposes.

II. Submission to God's Law

There is another area of submission indicated in the next paragraph, submission to the law of God. Paul gets there by talking about love. **“Owe no one anything, except to love each other”** (v. 8). Some understand this to be a verse forbidding Christians from borrowing money. Our church leadership has not taken that view, as evidenced by our taking on some debt in order to pay for our recently-completed building project. I think this verse teaches that no debt is to be left unpaid. Christians are to honor their obligations. But there is one debt that will never be satisfied, no matter how much we pay toward it. Even a thirty-year mortgage will eventually be paid off if you stick with it long enough. But the debt of love will never be paid off no matter how much and how long it is paid. You will never fulfill your obligation to love.

It seems here that Paul agrees with that old Beatles song, “All you Need Is Love.” But then he adds a phrase that takes him out of agreement not only with the lyrics of that song, but with the vast majority of Americans. He adds, **“for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”** Paul says that love is the fulfillment of the law, and I think most Americans think that love is the end of the law. Love is interpreted to mean that as long as we convince ourselves that we are doing something with a feeling of love, then we don't need to bother with what the law of God says. This is the position that says that love is the end of the law, and the effect of it is lawlessness. It allows a person to do exactly what they want and nothing more.

Probably most pastors have heard a line of reasoning that goes like this. Joe is married to Sandy, but he finds that his excitement for his wife has waned considerably. By contrast, he works with a woman named Barbara, who he finds quite exciting. He tells himself that he does not love Sandy, his wife,

any longer, but loves Barbara instead. He is happy when he is with Barbara and unhappy when he is with Sandy. So he tells his wife that the loving thing for him to do is to divorce her and marry Barbara. How could he be loving her by staying in an unhappy relationship? Besides, he believes that God wants him to be happy, and he's not happy with Sandy.

Joe believes that love is the end of the law, not the fulfillment of it. To say that love is the fulfillment of the law is to say that the two must always be kept together. Young ladies, if you understand this, you will be armed against the young man who may tell you one day that if you really love him, you will be willing to have sex with him before you are married. If a young man says that to you, you can be certain that he is quite a good lover—a lover of self. Armed with what Paul teaches here, you can say to him, “Have you never read Paul, who said that love is the fulfillment of the law? You're telling me that love is the end of the law, which disagrees both with Paul and Jesus, who taught the same thing. Should I believe you or should I believe the one who died and was raised again and now rules the entire universe? If you really loved me, you would do so by keeping the law. You would be the champion for sexual purity, not for sexual promiscuity. So, I can only conclude that instead of loving me, you actually love only yourself, and you are willing to take advantage of me in order to satisfy your raging hormones. So, why don't you take me home, and don't bother calling me again.”

We have a significant capacity for self-deception. What we often do is to tell ourselves that we are doing something loving, when the truth is that we are just doing what we want to do, and we tell ourselves the convenient truth that we are really being loving. If you want to love others, then keep the law. So, if you want to love your children, don't covet. God convicted me of this just this week as I found myself coveting success for my daughter on the soccer field. To covet something is to want it too much, to the point that it becomes part of our identity. I can love her better by enjoying her success but pointing her to the things that really count—loving God and loving others. So if we are to love, we will need to submit to God's law.

CONCLUSION:

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I want to point out that in doing so we are coming to the one who knows how to submit. Jesus submitted himself even to the point of death. Look how fruitful was that submission, bringing salvation to the world. Let me encourage you to submit yourself as we come to this table. In doing so, you will find the words of our closing hymn to be real to you: “A life of self-renouncing love is one of liberty.”