

Be Transformed: Into A Good Citizen

Romans 12:1,2,13:1-7

Key Verses:

“Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” – Romans 12:1,2

“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.” –Romans 13:1

Last week we learned about “Being Transformed: in Love,” and part of the key verse was Rom 12:9, “Love must be sincere.” We all have some level of love for one another, but we learned that we need to have a genuine love for one another in view of God’s mercy. Any superficial love that we had for one another should be deepened and transformed into a sincere love. Likewise in today’s passage, we are taught what it means to be a good citizen. Many of us may already consider ourselves good citizens: we pay our taxes and abide by the laws of the land. To what extent though, can we follow this command: “Let everyone be *subject* to the governing authorities” ? What if our governing authorities are corrupt? Within the past few years, 2 (wow) of our governors and a state congressman were convicted of charges ranging from conspiracy, fraud, abuses of power and the improper use of campaign funds. How can we be good citizens if we have corrupt authorities such as these? Perhaps you can think of civic rulers that are worse or more corrupt. How can we be subject to these governing authorities?

Look at v.1, “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.” Everyone means just that – everyone: no one is exempted from submitting to the governing authorities, including you, me, and everyone on this campus, in this city, in this state, and in this nation. Of course, we probably take this fact for granted. It may have been different in Paul’s time. The Jews never liked being under Roman rule, and when becoming Christian this attitude may have still persisted. The Gentiles, when becoming Christian, may have had trouble subjecting themselves to a government system based on multiple pagan Roman gods. But Paul doesn’t qualify the governing authorities either. He doesn’t say everyone should only be subject to authorities that are good. Instead, he writes that everyone should subject themselves to the governing authorities, whether good or bad.

But why? First, there is no authority except that which God has established. No authority can exist unless God permits it. God is the final authority, and the ultimate authority – there is no authority outside of him, and there is no authority above his. Even Satan cannot do anything unless God gives him permission (Job 1:12). This means that even some of the most oppressive or corrupt governments, from the Nazis to North Korea, even the harsh government in Syria, exist because God has allowed them to. We are in no position to question God (Rom 9:20), but in his wisdom he has established all nations, both good and bad. Sometimes the corrupt, violent nations may be sent in order to discipline his people, for example when he sent Assyria to destroy Israel (Isa 7:18), or when he used Babylon to exile the Jews for their unfaithfulness (Jer 39). Dan 2:20-21 say, “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others.” Sometimes God may use nations to judge and discipline other nations. Sometimes he may use establish governments that reveal the consequences of our sins. The reason may not always be clear to us why some evil governments exist, but we must know that God is Sovereign, His will is the highest, and his will shall be done. We must also trust that God is good, and he intends all things for the ultimate good of His people.

Second, we must subject ourselves because rebelling against authority is equivalent to rebelling against God. Look at v.2, “Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” Paul is very clear here, but this might seem difficult to accept for some people. What if the government is corrupt? What if innocent people are being persecuted? Consider the time this letter was written – Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome during the time of Nero’s reign, and he would later even be martyred by Nero. Nero’s reign was marked by controversy, and in the later half of his rule he persecuted Christians, throwing some to lions, crucifying others, and some were even burned at the stake to be “night lights” for his gardens. Later, we would see Paul under house arrest, awaiting execution. He never mounted a rebellion against Caesar, and he did not flee from his persecution, but he wrote lovingly to Timothy, his dear son in Christ, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.”

To be clear, when we are forced to disobey God’s law through man’s command, we must obey God’s law rather than men. When it is against the law to pray or worship God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, we must still pray and worship. When it is against the law to preach the gospel and spread the good news, we must still preach. But is this considered rebellion? Remember the story of Daniel the prophet. He was a Jewish exile, who served King Darius of Medo-Persia. There was no corruption found in his service, and he did his work so well that the king loved him. However, it made all of the other administrators jealous, so they devised a plan and tricked the king into signing it – saying “Whoever prays to any other God or human except the king, shall be thrown into the lion’s den.” When Daniel heard the decree, still he went up to his room three times a day, got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to God, as he had always done. The administrators caught him, reported him and had him thrown into the lion’s den. The king was sorely distressed, and he couldn’t sleep at night. At the very first light of dawn, the king ran to the lion’s den, and called out for Daniel, to see if he was alive. Amazingly, Daniel answered, “May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty.” Daniel said to the king, “I have never done any wrong before you.” Daniel may have disobeyed the man-made law, but he never rebelled against the king. He never despised or slandered the king, but he continued to pray to God, and perhaps even prayed for the king as well. When we are forced to disobey God’s command, then we are not obligated to obey man’s law. If we disobey man’s law in obedience to God, we can still be in submission to the authorities. Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den for praying to God, but God delivered him. We shouldn’t use our obedience to God’s law as an excuse to disobey authorities, but when we legitimately desire to keep God’s command, we are not obligated to obey man’s law and can still be innocent of any rebellion.

God has a good purpose for the authority that he establishes. Unfortunately, because man is sinful, often those put into authority become worse because of their power. However, let’s see what intentions God had in setting up governing authorities. Look at v.3, “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from the fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended.” One reason

authorities exist is to discourage wrongdoing, and encourage right living (or righteous living). Governing authorities are “a terror for those who do wrong.” Have you ever felt the terror of authority? I have felt it at least on a few occasions. I’ve told the story before, about how I violated a “No Turn on Red 7am-7pm” at 6:55pm. The first terrors were hearing the buzzer from the police car, and seeing the red and blue lights flashing in the rear view mirror, while their helicopter search light shines on your car. Then there’s the terrible feeling watching the policeman come up to your car, ask you for your license and registration, and then make you sit there for 20 minutes while they check your profile. The worst though, was after that. I had to go to court to retrieve my confiscated license, and I tell you, very few times do I tremble before anyone, but I trembled before the judge that day. Now, I wait until it is 7pm before making a turn on red when I see the sign. Although the traffic story was lighthearted and funny, government authorities can be a serious matter. I saw a video a few months ago, where two teenagers were on trial for murder. As they were convicted and sentenced to jail, they both broke down and cried, because they knew they would spend the next few years locked up for the crime they had committed.

Another reason authorities are set up can be seen in v.4a, “For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good.” Civil authorities are civil servants. According to this verse they are also God’s servants, whether they know it or not, and they are servants for our good. Governments raise up and maintain armies to defend their nation. They create and enforce laws and regulations. These laws help maintain order and peace, and also try to make our quality of life better. Last month I had to take my car to get an emissions test, and I was not allowed to buy a car registration sticker until I passed the test. We have laws to keep our air clean, our water clean and our food clean. The government also administers and maintains programs and agencies to serve the public. I’m thankful for that the government is able to cover the costs of my father’s medical care, which might cost something more than he and I would be able to support.

In the last part of v.4, there’s a third purpose for governing authorities: “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.” The government helps to keep human sin in check. Imagine, without a government, people doing as they please. It would be total chaos, anarchy. People would kill one another without consequence. You could rob a bank or a store and without governing authorities, you wouldn’t be punished. Societies would not be able to function without some form of government, because man’s sin would destroy it. Notice that rulers do not bear a sword for no reason. Sometimes when you think of a king, they might have a sword in their hand. King Arthur comes to mind. Even playing cards have an image of the king with a sword. However, that sword isn’t just for decoration – it’s to execute punishment. God has given the right for governing ruler to execute punishment on behalf of God toward the wrongdoer. There are crimes universally known to be sinful and wrong throughout the world – murder, theft, deceit and adultery. These are laws that God has written on man’s heart. It doesn’t matter if the person is Christian or not, but everyone knows in their heart that a violation of these laws requires punishment. God has given the authority to governing rulers to administer punishment.

Therefore, Paul says in v.5, “it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.” Christians, we have an additional reason to submit to authorities – because it’s also a matter of innocence before God and before man. We don’t just submit to avoid punishment, but we submit because we want to do what is right in God’s eyes, so that he would be pleased, and we want to do what is right in men’s eyes, so that God may be glorified (1 Pet 2:12). We are not driven by fear, but motivated our love for God. Take taxes, for example, which is also in the following verse. We don’t avoid paying taxes because of possible fear of punishment. Although, if we are charged with tax evasion, it could result in a 2 year prison sentence. The gap in taxes, according to a recent article, in 2011, was \$385 billion. I’m not sure if that’s just for the year, or how to really interpret it, but it does sound like a lot of missing money, and a lot of people avoiding taxes. We don’t submit, or pay our taxes out of fear of punishment, but we pay our taxes because we want to be good, responsible citizens before God and before men.

Now, most people may be ethical enough to know that paying taxes is the moral right thing to do. What separates the Christian from the unbeliever? Again, it’s the conscience, with an aim towards pleasing God. When we subject ourselves to authority, and desire to please God, then we can submit when times are good, but also when times are bad, when we are undergoing suffering or persecution. In 1 Sam 24, Saul was trying to pursue David in order to kill him. In an interesting coincidence, Saul walked into a cave to relieve himself, and in that cave, David and his men were hiding. David had the chance to kill Saul and end this life threatening chase, but he cut off just a corner of his robe. The Bible says, “Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. He said to his men, ‘The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord.’ With these words he sharply rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul (1 Sam 24:5-7).” There was David with a chance to kill his enemy, but his conscience was stricken at his desire to kill someone the Lord anointed.

With a good conscience, we must do the things mentioned in v.7: “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes.” It’s interesting to note that taxes are mentioned in both v.6 and 7. As we saw before, tax evasion is a common and a crime punishable for up to 2 years of prison time. The Jews also despised paying taxes to Caesar. They challenged Jesus in Luke 20:22-25, “Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus asked them to show him a coin, and said who’s portrait and inscription is on it? “Caesar’s” they replied. Then Jesus said to them, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” As Christians, we do have that dual responsibility – to pay our taxes, and to offer to God (new students please don’t feel obligated). So if it is taxes we owe, we ought to pay our taxes. If revenue, then revenue. I knew people who saved up parking tickets as trophies. The only problem is, the fines double after 7 days. How about those Chicago parking meters! In downtown they are \$4 an hour now! But for conscience sake, and for the Lord’s sake, we should pay that too.

We must also give respect to those whom respect is due. Although we see a lot of corrupt politicians in the news, there ought to be some true, hard-working representatives in Chicago. One person we should respect is the Alderwoman in this district, who can help us move forward with the Bible House. But respect not for the Bible House’s sake, respect for the Lord’s sake, that he may be glorified. And finally, we should give honor where honor is due. If

you read in Acts 26:2, Paul addresses King Agrippa, who was the king of the Jews at that time, “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews.” Paul, though he was falsely accused, gave honor and respect to King Agrippa. When addressing dignitaries in letters, you would address them as “Mr.”, or “Honorable _____”, or “His Excellency.”

Paul has exhorted us to be subject to all governing authorities. The role of the authorities are to terrify those who do wrong, to be servants for our good, and to be God’s avengers of evil. Yet, what do we see today? We see in our government that those who do wrong are not terrified. Some people who have done wrong have been acquitted and pardoned of their crimes. Many servants, instead of being servants for the good of the people, are servants for the good of themselves. They are supposed to be punishers of evil, but it seems more and more, evil is being called good, and good is evil. Not only in our country, but there is turmoil all over the world – in Egypt, in Syria, in North Korea. What is going on? Judgment is coming. As the sin of the world is increasing, as governments, the guardian of the people, grow more and more corrupt, the day of the Lord will come closer and closer. How will we escape this judgment? How will we escape the wrath of God? Controversies will continue to grow between our politicians: is it worth the effort to join one side or another? Rather, let us submit to whatever authority God has established. There was much controversy in Paul’s day. Roman emperors killed each other to get to the throne. But he wrote these things so that they would not get caught up in the controversies, but to rather do God’s will.

Consider our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ the Son of God. He was falsely accused of insurrection, of inciting a rebellion against the Roman government, but he submitted to authority. He was brought before Pilate, who said to him in John 19:10-11, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Don’t you know I have the power either to free you or crucify you?” Jesus answered, ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.’” God gave Pilate the power to crucify his One and Only Son, and Jesus submitted, even to the point of death, so that he would become the sacrifice accepted by God for the forgiveness of our sins. How can we submit? How can we submit to such terrible governing authorities on earth? We cannot, unless we are transformed. *When we believe* in God’s one and only Son, Jesus Christ, we are transformed. Only through Christ are our sins forgiven, so that we can escape the judgment that is to come. Only through Christ, are our minds renewed. Because of Christ, we can offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, and submit to the governing authorities, no matter how harsh. *Believe in Christ.* Only Christians can do this. And through submission, we bring glory to God. As Christians we should be the best citizens in the world – we are good subjects, pay our taxes, our revenues, our respects and our honors – but the best part is, we pray for our governing authorities. Let’s remember to pray for those who are in office. When we subject ourselves, we become good witnesses. When the apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, saw the witness of the stoning of Stephen, God began to work toward his conversion. If we are thrown in prison, sinners can find freedom in us through Christ. If we are put to the death, sinners will see that our hope is in eternal life in Christ Jesus. Through Christ, when we subject ourselves to authority, we will be able to test and approve God’s will – his good, pleasing and perfect will.