

Gospel Culture In The World

Romans 13:1-7

As the old saying goes, when you're gathered with family it's best to avoid talking about religion or politics. Well, today, as we gather as a church family, we're going all in on both.

And that shouldn't really be a surprise. For the Christian gospel is unavoidably political. Consider the opening of the letter to the churches in Rome. Paul says he is writing about the gospel of God,

regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 1:3-4)

Or hear the concise and climactic description of the gospel in Romans 10:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Verse 9)

To be a Christian, is to believe that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. Jesus is the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, forever and ever, Amen. This is an explosive, and yes, political claim. The angry mob who dragged the early Christians before the city officials in Thessalonica were right: The church was turning the whole world upside down, saying there was another king, not called Caesar, but called Jesus. (See Acts 17:6-7).

And so it shouldn't surprise us that the early church, and especially the church in Rome, had all sorts of questions about how to relate to Caesar and the governing authorities. And it shouldn't surprise us that Paul addresses this question here in Romans 13.

For we've been learning over the last few weeks about what it means to live in view of God's mercy. As those who confess that Jesus is Lord, we have been gathered into a new fellowship, a body of believers, connected together in genuine love and humble service.

But such bodily life within the church does not happen in a vacuum. A gospel culture does not conform to the pattern of this world, yes. But we can't avoid the fact that every gospel culture forms and grows *in the world*. Every body of believers exists in a particular time and a particular place under particular circumstances. As we live as Christ's body, we face persecution and suffering, people of high and low position, those who are rejoicing and mourning, and everything in between. In every case, the gospel creates gospel culture, and that then spills out over into the world as goodness and generosity. Mercy breeds mercy, even for our enemies.

But what about governments? Whether in the imperial capital, or in a Western democracy, how does the body of the church treat those who wield human and earthly authority?

That's what Romans 13:1-7 seeks to address, and that's what we're going to think about today. As always, the answers God gives to these questions in the Scriptures are surprising and challenging. And it's prayer that we will see they are **also** mind-renewing and transforming, both for us and for the whole world.

1. The Christian Posture of Submission

So here's the main point: *the basic Christian posture towards governing authorities is submission*. You really can't miss it. Paul gives the same instruction in verse 1 and verse 5:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

...it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

We'll unpack the reasons given for submission in a moment, but again let's not miss the point: *the basic Christian posture towards governing authorities is submission*.

And I think the passage itself gives us some helpful ways to think about what submitting to the governing authorities actually means. So in verse 2, the opposite of submission to the authorities seems to be rebellion against the authorities. In verse 3 the emphasis is on doing what is right, rather than what is wrong. Verse 4 says that governments *bear the sword*. Perhaps submission means we don't try to wrestle the sword *away* from governing authorities, rather we accept their right to rule and to judge.

What Paul is doing here is extending the same principles he has just given about personal conflict into the realm of political conflict. When we are persecuted or harmed by others, Paul urges us not to retaliate or to take revenge into our own hands; in other words, we don't take judgement into our own hands, rather we show mercy and kindness, leaving judgement to God.

Much the same thing is going on here. The body of believers is not to respond to those who govern with rebellion, or retaliation or revenge. We don't take judgement into our own hands, placing ourselves over and above those who rule. Instead we seek to do good in humble submission, and we leave such judgement to God. Once more: *the basic Christian posture towards governing authorities is submission*.

2. The Christian Reasons for Submission

In between verses 1 and 5 Paul outlines the distinctively Christian *reasons* for our Christian posture of submission. And I suspect that this is where a lot of our questions will come from. But here's what Paul is saying: The rule of the risen Lord Jesus does not *remove* all earthly authority, but places all earthly authority *under* the Lordship of Christ. There's two things going on simultaneously here: on the one hand we are told that governing authorities are legitimate. On the other hand what Paul teaches here relativises and limits the role of governing authorities. Let's consider each of these in turn.

- *The Governing Authorities are Legitimate*

So look again at verse 1:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

I reckon that Paul anticipated a massive double take in the church, and not a little disbelief at that claim. So he repeats himself just so they know, and we know, that we've read it right:

The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

There is *no* authority which God has not established. *Every* authority which exists is instituted by God. Straight away, I think, we look for a caveat. But there's so little wiggle room in what Paul says here, it's understandable that we might feel a little claustrophobic.

There are important questions to consider about incompetent, or dangerous, or demonstrably evil governments. But first, let's not miss that earthly authorities are a good gift from God. For verse 4 tells us that the authorities bear the sword, and are God's servants to punish wrongdoing. And in a world wrecked by sin, that is a good thing.

For there is all manner of evil and injustice around us. And often we experience great harm that is done directly to us. Of course, we hope for God's final judgement when every injustice will be punished and every wrong will be righted. But now, here on earth, governments are given so that some measure of judgement may also be passed in this life. Human authorities are given by God the right to punish the thief, and the abuser, and the murderer. They can defend the poor and the weak and the vulnerable. They can judge those who are dangerously reckless and punish those who deliberately do wrong.

And the main point for Christians to recognise is that we don't stand outside that judgement. Just because we follow Jesus as Lord, the church does not become a law unto itself. Not in Rome, nor in Sydney. And this too is good. Over the last several years we've seen horrible abuse come to light that has taken place in Christian churches. And it is right that the evil done in our midst would be judged, and punished for what it is. This is the legitimate purpose for which God has established human authority. This is why we don't reject that authority or rebel against it, but submit to it.

- *The Governing Authorities are Relative*

But even here we see that Paul is relativising the role of human authorities. Governments have a legitimate place in God's purposes, but also a limited place. Their authority is given for the purpose of punishment of wrongdoing. The Apostle Peter echoes Paul in his first letter, and adds that governments are given the authority to commend what is right. Punish those who do wrong, promote what is good.

What's more, Paul refers to governing authorities as *God's servants*. They are agents of God's wrath and justice, not their own. Once again, their authority is legitimate but not ultimate. Whatever authority they have, they exercise *under God*, which means they will be held to account *by God*.

Well, if the legitimacy of authority was surprising to the Roman church, this would have knocked their socks off. For the emperors of Rome styled themselves as sons of the gods. Here they are told they are servants, whether they recognise it or not. It is a mark of the impact of Christianity on the world that 2000 years later, the leader of our country is the prime-minister: literally the head servant.

Here as well, an answer begins to emerge regarding rulers who are evil, or rulers who are hostile to Christianity. For that was certainly the case in Rome at the time this letter was written. The emperor Nero was hardly a friend of this new Jesus-movement. In fact the whole Bible is filled with oppressive rulers like Pharaoh in Exodus, or mad tyrants like the Kings of Babylon, or with wicked rulers of Israel who ignored the poor and the downcast. And in every case, those who forget they are servants, those who set themselves against the Lord, and those who abuse and misuse their God-given authority are judged by God. Their kingdoms may rise, but in every case they fall.

We have all been troubled by the images and videos coming out of Russia and Ukraine. One ruler on an ego-trip doing untold damage to the lives of millions of people. Not just to his so-called enemies but to his own people as well. As confronting as it is, Romans 13 tells us that Putin has been established by God. But it also tells us that Putin is accountable to God. And it tells us, and every arrogant dictator,

to remember that, win or lose, **they will die** and that there will be no invading or conquering the kingdom of God.¹

The theologian Russell Moore was correct when he wrote this week:

Vladimir Putin will be humiliated, either in the short run by the brave people of Ukraine or in the long run by a God who stands over the wreckage of ancient Egypt, ancient Babylon, and ancient Rome.

¹ https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march-web-only/ukraine-russia-putin-lent-ash-wednesday-time-of-war.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=post&utm_campaign=article

Romans 13 is in the Bible. And so is Psalm 94: (verses 1, 20-23)

The LORD is a God who avenges.

O God who avenges, shine forth. ...

Can a corrupt throne be allied with you—

a throne that brings on misery by its decrees?

The wicked band together against the righteous

and condemn the innocent to death.

But the LORD has become my fortress,

and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.

He will repay them for their sins

and destroy them for their wickedness;

the LORD our God will destroy them.

The church, even under severe persecution, can refuse to fight back with force, because we take refuge in God our fortress.

But there's a message that *we* must remember closer to home as well. For one way that we could be conformed to the pattern world is by thinking and acting as if the government is the be all and end all of our society.

I get the sense that many people around us believe that our government is almost entirely responsible for the well-being of society. Whether it's climate change, or domestic violence, or the economy, or whatever, many of us too might hold the government to be ultimately responsible. And if things go wrong it must be because the government hasn't done enough or has done the wrong thing. It's very tempting to believe that if the right government is in charge then everything will be alright.

The problem with human governments, however, is that they are unfortunately human. If we place our hope in politics, our hope will be disappointed. Our disappointed hopes will lead to cynicism or outrage or detachment. We probably won't take up a physical sword against the government but we might take up a social media sword. We might become mocking or mean in the way we speak about those in authority.

We might resort to nasty political tactics, or compromised political candidates because winning is the most important thing. We might start to see everything through the lens of some so-called culture war rather than in view of the mercy of God. When politics becomes everything, it can very quickly become anything goes. Thank God that politics isn't everything. It wasn't under the totalising empire of Rome, and it certainly isn't now in an Australian democracy. "Do not put your trust in princes," says Psalm 146:3, "in human beings who cannot save."

We can fail to submit to governments by rejecting their authority completely. And so, Romans 13 tells us that governing authorities are *legitimate*. But perhaps the greater danger for us here is that we could fail to submit to our government because we have raised our expectations of their authority to a place that God never intended. And so, Romans 13 tells us that governing authorities are *relative*.

3. The Christian Practice of Submission

And so what do we do with all this? In the final two verses, we're given some really concrete instructions about how to practice submission to those who rule us.

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 honour, then honour.

There's great wisdom here. And it's a wisdom that we see again and again in the Scriptures. For God knows that our hearts can so easily be caught up in vicious cycles of bitterness and frustration that can very quickly consume us. We know the way that harbouring hatred against someone who harms us can do just as much damage to ourselves as it does to them. And so we read at the end of Romans 12 how we can interrupt that cycle by actively seeking good, even for our enemies.

And now we see the same wisdom applied here. We can get caught up in a vicious political cycle. Disappointed hope leads to despair, despair leads to division. In our divisions with others we can demonise them and depersonalise them, and then all of a sudden we are willing to say things that are demeaning, or do things that are damaging. In our own sinfulness we allow ourselves to be dragged into the political arena in such a way that we are **conformed to the world**, rather than transformed by Christ.

And so we take **transforming initiative** to resist that vicious cycle and do instead what is right and good. The simple act of paying taxes can help train our heart towards submission. As we exercise our democratic rights and responsibilities we can do so respectfully, and train our hearts towards submission. And in our conversation, or social media posts, or even in the dialogue happening in our own heads, we can do so with honour and humility, training our hearts towards submission.

Gospel Culture For the World

For as we consider these instructions, we must think within the context of what Paul is trying to do at the end of this letter. Every instruction is given under the umbrella of not conforming to the world, and becoming more like Christ. We're told to resist the urge to rebel against the authorities of this age, so that we can resist the urge to conform to this age. And when we remember that this is written to a church under the rule of an evil Roman emperor, we can hear Paul saying, "submit to them, so you don't become *like them*."

But we should also hear Paul saying, "submit to them, so that you may *overcome them*." For it would be easy to think that this call to submit is some sort of conservatism that doesn't want to rock the boat. Or that maybe it an act of quietism, a withdrawal from the world, or an ambivalence towards injustice and evil. But that is not at all the case. Look back to the very last verse of Romans 12. Paul writes:

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Romans 13 does not describe political conservatism or political quietism. Rather, it describes the path to *political victory*. It is the paradoxical path of suffering for doing good, of love for our enemies and mercy for the undeserving. It is a path that is willing to lose well, rather than win at all costs. It is the path of death and then resurrection, either political death, or maybe even physical death. It is the path that first carries the cross, and only then wears the crown. It is, in short, the path that our Lord Jesus has walked before us.

And we see so many of the themes we've considered today as Jesus stood on trial before Pilate. Pilate looked in that situation like the guy with all the power, and he thought that as well. He was utterly perplexed why Jesus wasn't resisting or fighting back, or at least trying to protect himself. And to Pilate's confused questioning, Jesus responded:

My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest... You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above ... (John 19:11; John 18:36)

Jesus **did** recognise Pilate's power, but he **relativised** it: it was given to him from above. And Jesus declares he rules a different kingdom. One where the meek, not the mighty, will inherit the earth. Such a claim looked utterly foolish as Jesus died a humiliating death under an ironic sign that read "King of the Jews." But in view of God's mercy, Jesus lifted up on the cross is the King of heaven lifted up in glory. What looked like abject defeat was resounding victory. And in the meek submission of Jesus, is our magnificent salvation.

Pilate was a cowardly ruler, and we remember that every time we say the Apostles' creed: Jesus...*suffered under Pontius Pilate*... And yet as we say his name we remember that even he was God's servant for our good. Because Jesus overcame Pilate's pathetic evil, with his perfect good.

And so as we submit to our authorities, and especially as we submit to governments we disagree with, we are expressing our faith that the way of Jesus **is** the way of victory. We are expressing our hope that like Jesus, our suffering will be vindicated in resurrection. And so we persevere in loving God and loving our neighbour whatever the cost. And we do this together as a church. Trusting that a gospel culture of faith, hope and love, visible and distinctive *in the world*, will be used by God for the good *of the world*.

And so as a church we sheath our political swords, physical and metaphorical, and trust instead in the power of gospel proclamation, gospel prayer, and gospel practice. We embrace the fact that we are not agents of God's wrath, but agents of his mercy, and **proclaim** the other-worldly kingdom Jesus with bold confidence. We don't primarily speak about Christian morals, but about the Christian gospel, calling people to repentance, and faith in Christ.

And we **pray**. Not because we are resigned to doing nothing, but because we trust more in the power of our prayers than in our own political manoeuvring. We pray that our leaders will trust in Jesus. We pray that they would act for the sake of truth and justice. And as we are confronted by evil rulers we pray that they would repent of their pride and malice, and be frustrated in their plans and desires. There are plenty of Psalms we can use asking God to judge wicked rulers, that they would fall into a trap of their own making.

And we **practice** the self-sacrificial love of Jesus. We give ourselves to humble service in the body of believers, we show counter-cultural generosity and hospitality, we extend surprising blessing and mercy. And as we do that, we show our governments and our fellow citizens, that there is another game in town. Instead of greed and consumerism, we practice gratitude and contentment. Instead of satisfying our every fantasy, we practice self-control and faithfulness. Instead of constant striving for success, or the next step up on the ladder, we practice rest in the finished work of Christ, and we step down in service of the least and the last and the lost. Instead of hoping for the next “Great Leader” to fix all our problems, we confess One Lord Jesus Christ, who has forgiven us, and is fixing us up from the inside out.

As we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, God may use our witness to renew the mind of our culture, and see our world transformed by the message of the gospel. We might not have the slightest clue how God would use our little body to change the world, and our life together may feel small and insignificant, but that’s what is happening as gospel culture grows in the church. Many may think that such an approach to politics is foolish and naive. But then again, a crucified King has never looked impressive to the world anyway.

And so hear these words from Peter Leithart, which I have found immensely encouraging in my preparation this week. May they encourage your heart today, too:

You may feel invisible, but that's an optical illusion. You're participating in the biggest project imaginable. You're joining with millions of others in growing the body of Christ. Through your witness and labour, a new world is taking form. You're fighting the battle of the ages. You're constructing the city of God among the cities of men, in order to transform the cities of men to become like the city of God. *Nothing* is small in the kingdom of Jesus.