

## Under God, Over the People

In this series of articles we're looking at the role of the civil government in society and how Christians should respond to God-appointed authority. Our text is Romans 13:1-7. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (13:1). We concluded last time by noting that the word translated "subject" is a military term and means "to rank under" or "to line up under." This verb or its cognates is used several times in the letters of Paul. It's also used by Luke as well as six times in 1 Peter. Whenever it's used it always carries the idea of obedience with no thought given as to whether or not that obedience is deserved. In other words, as long as those who are in authority over us are not asking us to disobey the teaching of God in scripture we're to willingly—and even gladly—obey what we're asked to do knowing that our obedience is God's will.

Several years ago, it was reported by the media that two young men were seen breaking into a house in broad daylight. When the police arrived on the scene, these young men were apparently commanded by the police (which included the police chief) to get down on the ground. But rather than doing what they were commanded to do they got into an altercation with the officers and one of the young men was fatally shot and died shortly thereafter. This type of thing is always a tragedy. When it happens, in grief and anger those who're left behind have, at times, looked for someone to blame.

On the day of the funeral, the local pastors in that town rightly expressed the need for forgiveness and leaving vengeance to the Lord. In spite of this, one man who was listed as a "community activist" by the newspaper is reported to have called the officers "murderers." At the funeral he took issue with the pastors who had urged the congregation to submit to authority. The following is the newspaper's accounting of the words spoken by this man. "We talked at those kids, not to them. Everybody was more or less lecturing them not to be angry. In this case, the kids aren't resisting arrest; they're resisting injustice. They're thinking, 'I'm not doing anything wrong and they don't have the right to tell me to get on the ground.'"

Let me be clear that I, personally, know nothing about the "community activist" who made these remarks nor the deep grief that he must have been experiencing at that time. And yet, I'm absolutely appalled at what he's advocating. If we take his statement to its logical conclusion, he's advocating that, rather than obeying the authorities (which in this case is the police), we shouldn't have to obey and submit to them if we determine that we're not doing anything wrong! That kind of thinking—if acted upon—will only lead to more killing and if acted upon on a large scale will lead to anarchy. The Reformers believed, and rightly so, that even a bad government is better than no government which is exactly what you have with anarchy. God calls us to willingly submit to those in authority. If we're proven to be

innocent of any wrongdoing, this will all be taken care of in the manner prescribed by the law. We, ourselves, cannot unilaterally decide not to submit to those in authority over us. Seeking to follow biblical teaching is always right even though we understand that no government is perfect and sometimes innocent people will be wrongly hurt.

Why are we to be subject to the governing authorities? Paul's teaching in verses one and two gives us our answer. "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Let's conclude today with some practical application.

—There's no legitimate authority except from God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. These authority structures in society include authority in the home (Ephesians 5:22-6:4); the workplace (Ephesians 6:5-9); the church (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13) and the government. Willing and respectful submission will also include submission from students to teachers and administrators.

—Going back to our focus on government, we not only submit but we're to pray for those over us in civil government (1 Timothy 2:1-3). In any government structure there will surely be reasons to be grieved over decisions that are made. Our response is not to tear down but rather to build up by "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

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