

The Freedom of Our Submission

In this series of articles that touch on the subject of God-ordained authority we've looked first at the foundation of our submission to authority. We're under authority in several spheres in our lives because that is what God has commanded. Today I want to begin to look at the freedom of our submission to authority. Unlike sinful mankind, God does not arbitrarily issue frivolous commands. As in all of God's dealings with mankind, what he commands is always what's best for us in any and every situation. Christian freedom—sometimes referred to as Christian liberty—is very often misunderstood or misconstrued. Some have sought to hide behind the veil of “Christian liberty” as a covering for involvement in some type of sinful behavior. In this epistle, Paul teaches the truth that Christians are “free in Christ.” In chapter 6 Paul reminds us that, before Christ, we were slaves to sin. Our sin nature kept us from being able to be rightly motivated to make any choice that would be pleasing to God. Mankind's inherent sin nature drives us to make choices that are ultimately meant to please ourselves no matter how it may appear.

But, as Christians, a great change has taken place in our lives. “Our old selves (nature) were crucified with Christ in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6). Christians now have a new Master. “...and being set free from sin we have become slaves of righteousness.” Notice also how Paul connects our obedience to God to our growth in holiness: “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (6:22). We're all prone, apart from biblical truth, to get things all mixed up. How often have we succumbed to the world's idea that submission to authority is slavery? Rather than this, scripture teaches us that Christians are free to obey God from the heart in a way that we were never able to do before we were saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ. Paul is teaching us that submission to authorities—rather than being something to rebel against—is actually true freedom! In every social sphere that God has placed in our lives, in the home, in the workplace, in the church and in the civil government, we'll find our truest blessing in submitting to the authorities that God has ordained.

The apostle Peter—who, like Paul, was martyred under the Roman Emperor Nero—gets at this same thing in his first epistle. After calling on Christians to submit to the authorities that God has placed over them he writes, “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as slaves (bondservants) to God” (1 Peter 2:16). Jesus taught this same reality of understanding that true liberty is found in our grace-given freedom to obey every command of God (although imperfectly in this life). “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Let's look further in our passage in Romans and see the ways in which Paul describes this freedom. Paul

notes first of all that Christians who seek to submit to the governing authorities have a genuine:

—freedom from fear: “For rulers are not a terror (cause of fear) to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval” (13:3). Although Paul is giving us a universal truth that always applies according to God’s perfect will for each person, we have to remember that he’s writing specifically to Christians. As Christians, we should know that Paul is simply calling us to do something that we should already desire to do—to obey, by grace, God’s truth at every point. As long as we’re seeking to obey God, we have no reason to fear because God is absolutely in control of whatsoever comes to pass in our lives. True freedom is always found in submitting to God’s will. In another place Paul writes, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). Christians are free from the yoke of our old sin nature. Yes, we still sin, but we’ve been given new desires and we must continue to seek, by grace, to obey God from the heart always!

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.