

“Nobody can tell me what to do!”

In this series of articles, we’re investigating the topic of God-ordained authority structures in each of our lives. Although our focus is primarily on the civil government, we don’t want to ignore any of the authorities that God has ordained. Last time I took a short break from this topic to write an article geared toward the Christmas season. Today I want to pick up our look at Romans 13:1-7 with a brief review. In the first phrase of verse one the apostle Paul is issuing a command from God: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” Next, Paul gives us the reason for and importance of this command: “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.” No matter the incendiary braggadocio of those who’ve said something like, “Nobody can tell me what to do!”, the reality of life doesn’t support that claim. We’re all—in one way or another or to one degree or another—under authority. That being true, let me remind us of a portion of what we’ve seen thus far:

—There are a number of authority structures including authority in the home (Ephesians 5:22-6:4; Colossians 3:18-21); in the workplace (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1); in the church (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13); as well as in the civil government (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). It’s important that we look at our lives to see if we’re exhibiting love and willing submission to God’s ordained authorities or rebelling against them.

—Secondly, I’ll remind us that we’re not only commanded to be in subjection to the civil authorities, we’re to pray for them. (1 Timothy 2:1-3). In any government structure there will be reasons to be grieved over decisions that are made. Our response is not to tear down but rather to build up and to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Should we be tempted to think that rulers in Paul’s day may have been easier to submit to than civil authorities in our own day, let me give a brief illustration from the pages of history.

Historians record for us that the Roman Emperor Nero came to power on the 13th of October of 54 A.D. At first Nero was a reasonable ruler who was not entirely unpopular with those he ruled. But in a few short years after he ascended to power, he became increasingly infatuated by dreams of grandeur and a lust for all of the pleasures that power and wealth could attain. He came to fear that he would lose his throne so he began to systematically eliminate anyone who he felt was a threat. He murdered his mother first, and then his wife. Most began to wonder privately if Nero was going insane. But Nero’s wickedness had not yet reached its zenith.

Sometime after midnight on the 19th of July, A.D.64, the night after a full moon, a fire broke out at the Northeast end of the Circus Maximus (a huge outdoor amphitheater where chariot races and other events were held). The fire would rage

for five days. Before it could be fully contained, much of the city of Rome was either destroyed completely or severely damaged. Some secretly speculated that Nero was to blame for setting the fire. It was believed that he had grand plans for the complete rebuilding of the city and he needed to eliminate the old city to enact his large scale plans. But someone would have to take the blame for the fire. To take any suspicion off of himself, Nero directed the blame toward Christians. Why the Christians? Because so much of the first century Roman way of life was bound up in what Christians regarded as immorality and idolatry, they wouldn't take part in it. Thus, they were generally unpopular. The execution of Christians became an occasion of popular entertainment. Some were crucified, some were sewn up in the skins of animals and hunted down and then ripped apart by vicious hunting dogs. Others were covered with pitch (tar), put on poles and set on fire to serve as living torches to light the way to Nero's palace for his grand parties.

These are the times in which Paul lived and ministered. Just a few years after writing, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities," Paul was martyred under the reign of Nero and yet, during his lifetime, he sought to be an example of godly submission to authority. He truly believed that all legitimate authority is ordained by God.

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