

GOD AND GOVERNMENT

Romans 13:1–7

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Our Scripture today is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Romans 13:1–7, NIV).

This is the second time in my life I’ve preached from Romans 13:1–7. I’m amazed at the timing of both the sermons, although this sermon is different from what I preached from the text about eight years ago. The last time I preached from Romans 13:1–7, I was campus pastor of Evangel College. I was preaching through Paul’s letter to the Romans, and I came to a particular segment where it was time to take up Romans 13. I gave my chapel message that morning, and there was an unusual quiet that seemed to rest over the student body of about a thousand. As I talked about, for example, obeying police officers, showing respect

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and courtesy toward those that uphold the law, the silence was so memorable and so thick that you could cut it with a knife. That was unusual for a chapel. I inquired of some of the students afterwards why it was that things had grown so very quiet. They said, “You mean you preached that sermon without knowing what happened last night?” I said, “What happened last night?” It was springtime and, you know, when springtime comes sometimes on college campuses students become a little restive. Exams are coming up. They want to blow off a little steam. It so happened that some of the students had gotten into a ruckus, pulled some practical jokes. Police were called out on campus to kind of quiet things down. Some of the guys from a second story dorm were throwing water balloons down on the patrol car. I had the unusual timing of “be subject to the authority.” I didn’t know fifteen months ago when we began looking at Romans on Sunday morning that the week before property tax is due and two weeks before income tax is due that we should have this text. So, evidently, the Lord wants us to hear it.

We just spent a lot of time in Romans 12, which spoke to us about our relationship within the body of Christ, a relationship to each other. Romans 13 speaks of our relationship to society, to the world, to life at large. When we look at text like Romans 13:1–7, we must be careful that, as we look at it, we not only apply it to the United States, the country in which we live, but realize that a passage like this is timeless and is not limited by the type of government, by the time—by the twentieth century, seventh century, first century. It’s not limited by people. Whatever we say, therefore, about this text must not only be applicable to the United States of America, but it must be applicable to Christians in any country of the world. For what is said here applies to Christians in the good old U.S.A. It applies to Christians in the U.S.S.R. It applies to Christians in the People’s Republic of China, to those in Canada, in India, Uganda, Cuba, Mexico.

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These words, in fact, were written at a time when the Emperor Nero was on the throne, before things really got bad for believers. Some have said, —Since Paul is writing Romans 13 chronologically before Nero really turned bad, maybe he reverses his advice when the government really gets tough on Christians. But if you read 1 Timothy 2, which is written at a later time, or 1 Peter 2, which was written while Christians were going through tremendous persecution, you see that the counsel, the advice, remains the same. —Be subject to the government and those in authority^l has been instituted of God. In this passage today, basically we have two things. First, shortly and briefly, a command. Then the rest of the passage gives the reason why the command is given. The command is simply this: let every person be subject to the governing authorities. Every person. There is no exclusion—no one, because they are super-spiritual, or because they’ve become a Christian and think that now, somehow, they are separate and apart from the laws. No, every person is to be subject. In this country, we have seen a recent demonstration in our political history of how the law applies to even an incumbent president of the United States. Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. In our country, the supreme governing authority happens to be the constitution.

When we look at “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities,” we recognize that, literally, the word that Paul is using for “governing authorities” could be translated “the powers that be.” As we look at governmental structure, we recognize that there certainly is a stratification within governmental structure. Let me use an example of what I think could be a problem in being subject to the governing authorities.

Suppose that some high school students were meeting, some Christians, and they decided that they’d like to have a noon Bible study on the high school campus. So they meet. They ask for permission of the principal since we’re called to be subject to the governing authority, and

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the principal says no. How then do the Christian students respond to this verse, “Be subject to the governing authorities?” They’re going to do something that the Apostle Paul would do, if they understand the Scripture and the command correctly. In Acts 25, when Paul stood before a Roman governor named Festus, Festus wanted to send Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Paul, however, did not submit to that governing authority because he recognized that that governing authority was responsible to a higher authority. So he had the liberty of appealing to a higher constituted authority. He said, “I appeal to Caesar.”

So I would recommend that if the principal said no, the students appeal to the school board. What if the school board says no? Then, as our country is set up, they can appeal to the courts. They can go all the way up. They could appeal to the Supreme Court. What if the Supreme Court says no? In our country, you still have one more alternative. You can go for a constitutional amendment. And ultimately, if you can’t get the constitutional amendment, then you’ve got to make a choice. You’ve got to decide whether that issue is so incumbent that it is in that category that says with the apostles, “We will obey God rather than man” (Acts 4). Or whether you’ll legitimately come in under the governing authority.

The question might be raised, while the students are undergoing their appeal through the system, should they be disobeying while they’re going through their appeal? The principal says no, and they go ahead and meet anyway. The school board says no, and they go ahead and meet anyway. The courts say no, and they go ahead and meet anyway. Should they be disobeying? This is what’s known as civil disobedience.

I don’t have a direct word from the Lord here on this, but I would say with Paul, I think, to have the mind of Christ. It is this. Since our country provides so many opportunities for

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freedom of expression and for gathering, that it would be well on this issue to submit to the authority and to not make it a matter of disturbance or disobedience. Counsel might be different than, for example, Eastern European countries. I know that the above ground Christians and the underground Christians have a difference on this viewpoint. Because when authorities say every church to be legitimately constituted must be registered and must meet in an approved place, the underground church says, “That is Caesar dictating to our conscience, and we cannot take it. We must reject it.” The above ground church—which, a great part of it is believers, despite all the propaganda we hear—the above ground church has said, “No, in that area we will submit to the authority. At least we have the privilege of meeting. If they said, you can’t meet at all, then we’d have to choose to obey God rather than Caesar.” My counsel would be that we not disobey the civil authority. But if God leads you to disobey the civil authority, be sure that with Peter you can say, “God has told me to be disobedient and also be prepared to face the consequences of that disobedience.” To face it not complainingly, but joyfully.

So if the students get kicked out of school, they are to face that joyfully, and most of them would. Fortunately in our country, we don’t generally have an either/or kind of a situation. We have a stratification of government, which allows us a system of appeals. But ultimately, we recognize that in our country that to be submitted is to not only be submitted to the legislature, the judiciary, the executive branches of the government at all levels. But that ultimately, because God has ordained the constitution of this country to be its ruling instrument, we are submitted to it. That authority, that power, is instituted of God. Which brings us, then, to the reason why every person is to be subject to the powers that be. Paul advances these reasons.

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I. The first reason which he advances is that government and those who govern have been set in place by God.

Very strong language which he uses. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God. And those that exist [not just government in principle has been instituted by God, but those that exist] now have also been instituted by God” (Romans 13:1). We have no problems with this verse as long as it’s a good government. But when it’s a bad government, and we find that Paul is writing in the time of Nero and saying the government exists because of God and has been instituted by God, we immediately have some problems.

Scriptures don’t seem to have the problems we have. The pagan Babylonian ruler, emperor of the world, Nebuchadnezzar, in Daniel 4:35 comes to understand who the God of the Jews is: “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth” (NIV). Jesus testifies to the validity of that statement when Pilate stands before him and wonders that Jesus has no answer to make, because Pilate has authority. Jesus turns to him and says, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). So when we say every power has been instituted by God, we mean Abraham Lincoln, and we mean Jimmy Carter, and Richard Nixon, and Anwar Sadat, and Menachem Begin, and Leonid Brezhnev, and Idi Amin.

Which brings up the subject of why does God allow in office, set in place in office, those rulers who are bad, those rulers who are evil? I admit that that is a very great problem. I think as we look at Scripture, we can find some very simple—without their being simplistic—answers. I scanned the Scripture and came up with some reasons why God would institute in office, in authority, a person who was evil.

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A. I think one simple reason is a nation gets the rulers it deserves. Romans 1 involves a principle that God abandons society when it persists willfully in its disobedience toward God. That certainly was the case within Israel's and Judah's experience. Often, they got the kind of kings that most represented the evil that was present in society.

B. Another reason why God may institute a bad government is He intends for that government to be an agent for His judgment upon another country or upon a people. That's why He raised up Babylon and Assyria. He told the prophets this in the Old Testament. That they were to execute His judgment upon His people because they had disobeyed. He raised them up.

C. But whenever He raises up a power like this, He also has another purpose. That He intends to raise them up in order to execute judgment against that power. Thus God says in the Old Testament that He raised Pharaoh up for the very purpose of showing His name to the earth. And that in Pharaoh's reign would be a great manifestation of the power of God. God is likely to raise up an evil power in order to exercise judgment upon that power, upon that country.

D. An evil government can also be raised up in order that the works of Satan can be explicitly manifest. It is through the hideousness of government that we see the character of Satan. The hideousness of evil government. Theologians talked in the early 1920s about how we were going to have an era of peace. The war to end all wars had been fought. But it was the emergence of the Third Reich which astounded the liberal theologians. And as devastating as that reign was, it proved once and for all in modern times that there is a potent force called

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evil and Satan. It was manifest in the government that came into power. An egomaniac—Satan-maniac—kind of government, which is only a type of the type of government which will emerge at the end of the age when the antichrist himself will be raised up by God. For God will permit it to happen in order to once and for all manifest the supreme, monstrous character of Satan's rule, and to exercise then God's judgment against it.

E. God may raise up an evil government to work out His purposes in history. This is why I think He raised up the governments of the Romans and the Greeks. It was necessary for these governments to come to unify the countries of the world. God used the Greeks to unite most of the world with one language. Then He used the Romans to pave the way for the Gospel with safe roads to travel, and a time of peace. Why was all of that important? Because of the gospel coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ.

Travel needed to be easy. Language needed to be easy in order that the gospel could be communicated readily. There had to be peace, so God raised up the Caesars in order to prepare the way for Christ. Paul says this in Galatians. When the fullness of time was come.

I think if you had taken the great monarch Julius Caesar and said, "Do you know why you have been made emperor?" And told him there was going to be born in Nazareth of Galilee the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and it was necessary to have you as emperor in order to prepare the roads, unify the language, and bring a condition of peace in order that that Man's message may go out, he'd have shaken his head twice! But God raised him up for that very thing. Evil governments may also be instituted of God in order that our loyalty to God might truly be manifest. It is that evil government which puts us to the test whether we will serve

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God or mammon. Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were going to be thrown into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar? Nebuchadnezzar was furious and had a fire that matched his anger prepared. The three Hebrew children said to Nebuchadnezzar, “Be it known to thee, O king, that our God is able to deliver us from the fire. But if not, we’re not going to serve thee anyway” (see Daniel 3:16-18). I’d underline “but if not.” In that moment, their loyalty matched their commitment to God.

F. I think also God may allow an evil government to emerge in order to remind us that—whether the government is evil, or whether it is good, or whether it’s neutral—He, God, stands superior to all authority, and has His hand on the reign of history. And man is not going to accomplish his own purposes, but that the history of this world and kingdoms and nations are subject to His control and His government. And in the end, He, not man, is going to bring down the curtain on human history. Every time we see an evil government come into existence, we remind ourselves, as Christians, that the power of God is greater than that evil.

So God institutes governments of any stripe. And by the way, God institutes governments which are monarchical, and based upon an oligarchy, or based upon a democracy, or based upon a dictatorship. God allows, in His wisdom, numbers of forms of government. We who live in this country think that He has supremely endowed us and blessed us in the fact that He’s given us the kind of government which allows the people to participate. It is indeed a sacred gift. But God institutes governments, the powers that be. This is the reason that we should be subject to them—because behind the government is the instituting power of God.

II. A second reason that Paul gives us for the institution of government is that God has ordained that government restrain and punish evildoers.

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Especially verses 3 and 4 should be noted in that regard. Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad conduct. Where there is no government, then everyone will simply do what is right in their own eyes. Anarchy will result.

So God has instituted government. In God's point of view, some government—no matter how bad—is better than no government. God has chosen among every society to institute some form of government for this very reason. If you don't believe this, imagine for a moment what it would be like if Orange County were left without any form of government for a month. You might initially rejoice—no punishment, no police, no courts, no planning commissions, no city councils, nothing to restrain lawlessness in our society. You had better do one of two things. Board yourself in your house and make a fortress out of it for the month that there's going to be no government, or get out of the county. Because government—no matter how bad or good you think government is in Orange County and all the cities represented therein—is better than no government. It exists to restrain evildoers.

This matter of restraining evildoers is a complement to what was taught in Romans 12. In Romans 12, we are told never to take vengeance. If someone does us evil, we are not to pursue retaliation on them. But here Paul is saying that the government is instituted by God to execute God's wrath on the evildoer. The government, therefore, is instituted by God to be the agent of God's punishment. Are evildoers going to be punished in the judgment? Quite obviously, they are. But God has allowed, within the form of government, evildoers to be punished here and now. This is a process instituted of God. Therefore, if someone comes up to you and socks you on your chin and fractures it, you do not, according to the New Testament, have the right to double back and fracture their jaw. That retaliation has been taken away from you by the law of the Lord. But to the government is given the authority to

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file a battery charge against the person who did that. I guess in our government you have the right to decide whether you're going to press charges or not. But justice has been committed to the government, and the government does have a right to punish the evildoer. The government has never been given the charge by Jesus or Paul to turn the other cheek to bank robbers, embezzlers, murderers, and the like. No, they are the executors of God's justice.

One commentator, I think, has put it very well in showing how Paul here is augmenting and complementing what the Lord taught on the Sermon on the Mount. Paul, at this point, fills in the gap of the Sermon on the Mount, which leaves open the question, "If we suffer wrong and do not seek revenge, but return good for evil, does the offender get off scot-free?" "No," Paul replies. It is for this end that the civil law exists—to mete out justice on this earth. And this kind of law no man can take into his own hands. So the matter of enforcing the law is not a matter of a private, vigilante group. God has given it to the government to do.

How strong is this power to execute justice upon the wrongdoer? It extends even to the power given to the government by God to take life. Paul says that the one who bears the sword (the government) does not bear it in vain. The sword here is more than just a symbol of government. It was the manifest right of government to execute the harshest sentence possible for the retribution on crime, which would be the taking of life. Thus, it may be necessary in the defense of the government to protect its people from dangers within or dangers without, even to the extent of taking the sword. In a democratic society, we have the luxury of debating whether or not we think the government should use the sword. But it's very clear in Romans 13 that God has extended to the government that right, if it chooses to exercise it. The state—the government—mishandles its power when it does not restrain evil and when it pollutes justice. As Christians, therefore, we should be very concerned that at all

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levels of government—the legislative, the executive, the judicial branches of our government—that all phases of government are truly what they’re intended to be: a terror to those who do evil. And to the extent that government is not a terror to the evildoer—to that extent it is departing from the mandate that God gave it in creating it—when you look at our society, at the life retribution for crime and the fact that so much evil exists in our society, it may be a suggestion to us about a slipping of some moral foundations of our country and of our government. Government is meant to be a terror to those who do evil. A recognition that when you do a wrong, clearly violate the law, that retribution is certain, it is swift, and it is sure. This is a function of government: to restrain the evil.

Paul goes on to talk about our response, as Christians, to the government. In verses 1 and 5, he says we are to be subject to the government. Two functions in regard to the government. One, to be subject, and the other is to pay taxes. But to be subject, Paul says, we’re to be subjects of the government not only for the sake of wrath—that is, we know if we do something wrong we’ll get caught—but we’re to be subject to the government for the sake of conscience.

The difference between wrath and conscience is this. You’re driving down the freeway going eighty-five miles per hour. What are you doing? You are looking in your window, or you have a —bear finderl on your visor, or CB that monitors whether there are any Smokeys around or not. That’s what Paul is saying. You’re subject to the law for the sake of wrath. If Smokey is around, then you’re going to slow down to fifty-five. You’re not being subject for the sake of conscience, but for the sake of, if you get caught, the wrath. But if you’re driving fifty-five miles per hour, obeying the speed law, you don’t have to worry about who’s in the rear-view mirror or anything else. It’s not bothersome to you. You’re not violating the law.

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Therefore, you have nothing to fear.

Since this is income tax time, I thought you'd enjoy a copy of a letter I got a hold of from a newspaper, that someone sent to the Internal Revenue Service several years ago. They wrote this: "A few years ago, I cheated on my income taxes. My conscience has been troubling me. I haven't been able to sleep. So I enclose a check for \$50. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

One of the ways that we're subject to the government in a society such as ours—governmental structure such as ours—not only do we obey the law and pay taxes, but we also become involved in the government.

I sometimes wonder what the early Christians would think of the liberties we possess in this land and many times don't take advantage of. The early Christians, to whom this letter was written, had no opportunity to participate in their government. You have the chance, in a society such as ours, to participate in government—and even to hold office in that government. What a treasure! I think that part of being subject, as Christians, is our involvement in the affairs of the government, our concern to be politically aware, in a Christian kind of way, to issues and candidates. To become involved in the process. To, at a minimum, vote. And, to a maximum, ourselves be involved in the seeking or the holding of public office. It is part of being subject to the government, the Constitution of the United States, which allows us that privilege as free citizens.

The exhortation to Christians, then, is not only to be subject, but to pay taxes. Paul says that those who collect the taxes are ministers of God. Notice what he says in verse 6: "For this

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same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God.” Twice in this passage, he is using the term “servant” or “minister” to describe the government. In verse 4, he describes the government as “God’s servant” for your good. And the word in the Greek which he uses there is the word “deacon.” The government is the deacon of God. It serves God in promoting justice in society and punishes evildoers.

But Paul, when he describes the tax collectors, uses another word than the word “deacon.” He uses the term from which we derive the term “liturgy.” It literally, in the Scriptures, was used to describe a person who was a priest, who was involved in the priestly service of God. Involved in the priestly sacrifices, which only a priest could do. Involved in the priestly worship in the temple. Here, Paul is saying that the tax collector performs a priestly function, very sacred to God. That the taxes should be collected. Paul has nothing to say about the amount of the taxes. In a free society such as ours, that is open for debate. You’ll live with whatever the society or the legislature says. The point Paul is making is that without tax, a government cannot exist. That, therefore, the taxes, even if they’re a minimal kind of a tax, they’re necessary in order to maintain the government’s purposes of preserving order in society and using the sword to defend itself from enemies within and enemies without. Those who collect these taxes are to be seen as God’s servants—a new perspective on the tax collector. He says about these tax collectors that they attend to this very thing.

The word which he uses for attending to this very thing is the same word in the Greek which is used in verse 12 of chapter 12, where it says, “Be constant in prayer.” It means “always at it” kind of a thing. And the word here for tax collectors is that their ministry from God is to always be tax collecting. That is true.

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Paul says that, in regard to these taxes, there are four kinds of divisions to keep in mind. First, we are to pay taxes. Or the word “tribute” may be used. Beginning in verse 7: “Pay to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due.” The word that’s used here is the word for taxes that are placed upon persons or property. Then the word “revenue,” to know revenue is due. That might be literally translated, “Custom to whom custom is due.” This is the tax that is placed upon goods in transit. Or goods that are coming into a country. So, as a Christian, if you’re coming back to America after a trip in a foreign country and you have sewed inside your coat \$5,000 in gold watches and the customs agent says to you, “Do you have anything to declare?” you cannot say, “No, I don’t.” For it’s revenue to whom revenue is due. The customs collector is a priest of God appointed for the very purpose of standing there and collecting the tax on that piece of goods. Paul goes on to say that we’re to give respect to whom respect is due. The word “respect” here is literally the word “fear.” It carries the idea of reverence or deference. It’s especially used in regard to higher authorities. Those that were in important places of the government. Reverence and respect. Something that we need to keep in mind—that we don’t call civil officials names. That we don’t abuse them. That we don’t caricature them. That we don’t engage in the kind of speech towards those in the world that we wouldn’t engage in toward one another in the body of Christ. But that we are to let our lips be circumspect, that we do not denigrate someone else or malign his motives, no matter how bad they appear to be. But the Scripture is very clear at this point. Respect to whom respect is due.

Then honor to whom honor is due. It’s possible here what Paul means by the word “honor” is paying respect even to those who are the lower officials on the chain of command. As someone has said, “There is no one more petty than a petty official.” Yet Paul is probably saying here, “Even give these honor. Treat them with courtesy and deference. Respect.” So a

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rather wide-ranging admonition to Christians on our relationship to the government.

How does this relate to us as the people of God? Certainly, it shows us that the Lord never intended the Church to be the government. He never intended that the Church would exercise the powers of the government. God is not trying to get us, as a church, to get everyone in Costa Mesa or Newport or anywhere else all saved so we can take over the government and run it from this church or any church. Because God intends that the civil government exist side-by-side with the Church, and for individuals in the Church to be submitted to it. That's not within our interest. Our interest is with the government that is coming, the spiritual Kingdom. We're only interested in the temporal kingdom as it relates to the purposes which God has given to it, and the ways in which God has allowed us to become involved.

But it also means, when we look at subjection, that we start out with the layers of authority that God has called us to be responsible to. When we look at authority in our lives and we say, with a soldier that one time came to Jesus and said to Him, "I am a man under authority." We have that concept of being in the right kind of authority—as children in a relationship of respect and reverence and obedience to parents. In relationship within family that God has ordained, being subject under authority to one another. In a relationship within the body of Christ of subjection. To Christ, ultimately, as the Head, and to those whom God gives us places of responsibility.

And most importantly of all, are we subject ourselves in our inner life to the authority of Jesus Christ? For Romans 13:1–7 is simply an expansion of the theme that Jesus teaches in the Gospels. When someone comes and asks Him a question, "Should we pay taxes?"

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Jesus asks for a coin and says, “Whose image is on the coin?” They reply, “Caesar’s.”

And He says, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (see Matthew 22:15-22). Caesar can stamp his image on metal and paper and property and buildings. But Caesar can never stamp his image upon the heart, upon the inner nature. Only God can put His image there. And Jesus is called “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). And we are told in Scriptures that we are to be “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29). Not to come into conformity with the outward physical appearance of Jesus, but in the inward nature, be conformed to His image. Whenever Caesar or the government asks us to let Caesar’s image be put upon our heart, we say, “No, that’s not where it belongs.” Caesar can never stamp his image upon a human life. He can only put it upon metal and property and things. He can’t put it upon people. But Jesus, on the other hand, has come to put His image upon our hearts, “Stamp thine own image deep on my heart,” is the prayer of a hymn writer.

Are you subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ? If you are, then you’ll find these words in Romans 13:1-7 easier to fulfill. You’ll also be subject to the government God has instituted.