

Romans 13:1-7      “Be Subject to Authority”  
Daniel 2  
Psalm 2

December 21, 2008

The story of Daniel is an excellent illustration of how the believer ought to relate to authority.  
Nebuchadnezzar is a good example of a pagan king  
    who does not believe in the God of Israel –  
    except insofar as it suits his purposes!  
And yet he is God’s servant.  
    He has been appointed by God.  
And God demonstrates this by revealing his purposes for history to Nebuchadnezzar.

The book of Daniel shows us a picture of how a faithful Israelite  
    could serve in the court of a pagan king.  
He did not participate in the idolatry of the Babylonians,  
    but he did serve an idolatrous king.

Could you do this?  
    Could you be an advisor to a pagan ruler?  
        If you think about what you do in your work,  
        you may very well be in this position already!  
Our lesson from Daniel 2 shows us how.  
Daniel’s interpretation of the dream shows that all the kingdoms of the world  
    are legitimate in their own place.  
But the kingdom of God will arise and bring all the kingdoms of the world to naught.

And that is what has happened in the birth of the king, our Lord Jesus Christ.  
And this is why Psalm 2 calls on the rulers of the earth to “kiss the son” –  
    to serve the LORD with fear.  
If the rulers of the nations were wise, they would serve Jesus.

This is also why a Christian cannot become identified with a particular nation  
    or political party.  
Francis Schaeffer once said that Christians could be co-belligerents  
    with those who share our views on a particular issue.  
We can work together with anyone.  
But our allegiance is not to a political party –  
    or even to the United States of America.  
Our allegiance is given to King Jesus.

If anyone tries to tell you that Christianity is not political,  
    they are mistaken:  
        Christianity *is* political,

but the politics of the Kingdom of Christ cannot be easily squished  
into the political categories of modern American politics.  
After all, in politics (as much as any area of life)  
you must not be “conformed to this age,”  
but you must be “transformed by the renewal of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)

And Romans 13 tells us what this looks like,  
because while we serve the King of kings and the Lord of lords,  
we are called to submit to earthly authority –  
just like he did.

### **1. There Is No Authority Except from God (v1)**

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.*

*For there is no authority except from God,  
and those that exist have been instituted by God.*

The basic premise that Paul starts with  
is that all authority is from God.  
Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon.  
He had invaded Judah,  
killed thousands of Jews,  
and deported most of the people, exiling them far from home.  
He had also destroyed the temple of God in Jerusalem.  
He was a pagan who worshiped foreign gods.

But Daniel and his three friends served the king of Babylon faithfully.

Paul writes to the church in Rome at a time when Nero is emperor.  
Now it is possible that Paul is writing in the early years,  
before Nero went nuts.  
But that does not affect the principle here.  
Paul was well-read enough to know that good rulers are few and far between.  
The vast majority of rulers in human history have been self-seeking,  
unjust, cruel, and power-hungry.  
But Paul says that there is *no* authority except from God.  
He even goes on to make clear that he is talking about *de facto* governments:  
“those that exist have been instituted by God.”  
He is not saying that any ruler has inherent right to rule.  
When the Babylonians were overthrown by the Medes and the Persians  
there was no ongoing “right” of the Babylonian empire.  
When the Stuart monarchy in England was done away with  
by Parliament handing the monarchy to George I,  
that meant that George I was instituted by God.

And Paul's statement "instituted by God"  
rules out any sort of "social contract" theory.  
The authority of the state does not depend on "the consent of the governed."  
"Authority to govern and the subjection demanded of the governed  
reside wholly in the fact of divine institution." (Murray, *Romans*, II. 148)

Whatever government exists has been instituted by God.  
You may think that it is good, bad, indifferent –  
but you must submit to it.  
Obviously, if they command you to sin, then you must obey God rather than men –  
but you must still submit to the penalty.

After all, what made Paul think about civil rulers at this point in Romans?  
Perhaps it was 12:14 – "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

Paul's discussion of vengeance at the end of chapter 12  
would naturally bring up the question of persecution.

Paul does not encourage revolution or even "civil disobedience."  
Rather, he endorses submission.  
Your mission in life is not to change society.  
Rather, your mission in life is to bring about the obedience of faith among the nations.  
Whenever the church tries to change society, she fails,  
and the end result is that the church becomes conformed to this age.  
But when the church lives as the kingdom of God –  
a subculture of life and light in the midst of a dark and hostile age –  
then the power of Christ's kingdom is reflected in every aspect of life,  
the church becomes a picture of what human life should really be.

That's why Paul does not seem in the least bit interested in changing Roman society.  
It makes no difference to him what the Romans do.  
They don't believe in Jesus.  
And when the Romans become Christians,  
that changes nothing!  
Christians have to live as citizens of the kingdom of Christ –  
as children of the living God –  
no matter what.

## **2. Therefore Resisting Authority Is Resisting God (v2-4)**

*Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed,  
and those who resist will incur judgment. (v2)*

This is God's judgment.

This is why he speaks of "conscience" in verse 5.

After all, if God has appointed the authorities,  
then if you resist them, you are resisting God.

God has put the authorities in place for a reason.

That reason may be to chastise his people.

That reason may be to conform you to the likeness of Christ  
in his suffering and death.

But of course, that makes the next point all the more interesting:

*For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.*

Is this true?

Isn't it in fact notorious that many rulers have been a terror to good conduct?

Nero himself, only 5-6 years after Paul wrote these words,

allegedly set Rome on fire –

and then blamed the Christians for it,

and used Christians as human torches in his gardens.

How can Paul say that rulers are not a terror to good conduct?

Paul answers that question next.

*Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?*

*Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,*

*for he is God's servant for your good. (v-3-4)*

*But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.*

If you are driving 70 MPH in a 55 zone, then you should fear the magistrate!

If you are cheating on your taxes, then you should fear the magistrate!

But if you do what is good, then you will have no fear.

And indeed, if you do what is good,

then you will receive his approval.

Notice that Paul's attitude toward the magistrate is rather optimistic.

Remember, this is the same Paul who has been arrested, beaten, and nearly killed  
several times by the authority of the magistrate!

Yet he says that if you do what is good, you will receive his approval.

What does he mean?

Think about it.

When we went through the book of Acts,  
Paul modeled this approach.  
He did what was good, over and over again.  
And the result was that he received approval from the magistrates,  
over and over again.

Paul is not saying that the magistrate always has good laws.  
Neither is he saying that the magistrate is always just.

Rather, he is saying that if you submit to him and if you do what is good,  
then you will have nothing to be afraid of.

Indeed, even when Nero arrests you for your faith,  
and even when he orders that you be set on fire,  
you will have no fear,  
for he is God's servant for your good!

And though you go to your death unjustly,  
he is God's servant for your good –  
Because of him, you were given the opportunity to imitate Christ in his sufferings.

It is worth noting that Paul openly endorses the death penalty here –  
*he does not bear the sword in vain.*

The sword – the power of death – has been given to rulers for a purpose.  
And that purpose is to execute judgment against evil.

Nowadays we tend to think in terms of rehabilitating criminals  
(we even put them in “penitentiaries” to make them do “penitence”)  
or we think in terms of the victim.

But Paul says that the magistrate wields the sword for a very different reason:

*For he is the servant of God,  
an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (v4)*

The magistrate, Paul says, is a diakonos – a servant, a minister.  
A diakonos is one who serves on behalf of another – an agent or emissary.

And the magistrate wields the sword as the emissary of God,  
he is the one who brings vengeance against the evildoer.

The problem with crime (as with all sin)  
is that it is a violation of *God's* law.

Certainly the victim has been wronged –  
but that is not the worst problem.  
The fundamental problem is that God’s justice has been offended.

As long as we think that the point of human justice is purely “what works”  
for making life better here and now,  
then we will miss the point of why the magistrate bears the sword.

After all, the rulers are “servants” of God – they are “deacons.”  
All human authority is diaconal – it is ministerial.  
All human authority is derivative.  
The only “original” authority is God’s.  
The only absolute power is the power of his kingdom.

All nations derive their authority from him,  
and they rule (or are overthrown) at his pleasure.  
And all magistrates – all kings, presidents, legislators, governors, judges, policemen –  
all those in authority in every country are servants of God.  
They execute his wrath against the one who does evil.

Now, you might wonder,  
“What about Hitler? What about Saddam Hussein? What about the Taliban?”  
They, too, were servants of God,  
avengers who carried out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.

But like all wicked agents of God,  
God used them to bring judgment against others,  
and then destroyed them because of their own wickedness.

God’s purposes for history are beyond our ability to comprehend.  
I don’t pretend to know what the purpose of the Holocaust was.  
I don’t know why the Kurds were slaughtered.

But Paul here lays out the basis of common grace and common wrath.  
Human governments are here for our good.  
And while they often do much evil,  
it would be far worse if there was no government.  
And God even uses the evils of human government  
in order to accomplish his purposes.

He used the atrocities of the Babylonians to level the rebellious city of Jerusalem –  
and for that matter, to bring judgment against hundreds of other cities.  
Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful instrument of judgment –

a deacon of God who carried out God's wrath against the wicked.

But what about the righteous?

What about those who did good?

Sure, Daniel and his friends fared pretty well,

but there were others who perished in the assault against Jerusalem!

Again, as Paul has said,

they had nothing to fear,

because they did good.

### **3. Therefore Be in Subjection For the Sake of Conscience (v5)**

*Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath*

*but also for the sake of conscience. (v5)*

The reason why you submit to the government is not just to avoid God's wrath,

but also "for the sake of conscience,"

in other words, your submission to authority

is an expression of your submission to God.

Jesus Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

All sovereignty – all authority in heaven and on earth – has been given to him.

*Therefore*, you submit to those in authority over you,

because they are his deacons – they are his representatives.

Since the days of the apostle Paul

we have come up with this interesting idea of "popular sovereignty."

The United States Constitution says "we, the people," are the highest authority

(it is worth noting that the US Constitution does *not* recognize any divine authority).

What does that mean?

After all, sovereignty is indivisible.

You cannot say that each individual American citizen is "sovereign."

Rather, the American people – as a corporate body – is sovereign.

That sovereignty is expressed (constitutionally)

through our elected officials and our appointed judges.

Therefore, the Christian citizen in America still submits to the governing authorities.

While we have a different system than Rome did

for how the governing authorities come to office,

the same principle holds true.

The magistrate in America is still a servant of God.

He may *think* that he is the servant of the sovereign people –

but under God, he is called to rule.

#### 4. Therefore Pay Your Taxes and Show Respect (v6-7)

*For because of this you also pay taxes,*

Because of what?

Because the magistrate needs money in order to do what God has called him to do!

*for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. (v6)*

Here Paul switches words.

He had been calling the authorities deacons – ministers of God.

Now he calls them “leitourgoi” –

the word used for those who minister in the temple.

(and from which we get our word “liturgy”)

Not only are the magistrates diakonoi – not only are they agents and servants of God,  
they have an almost priestly role,  
as they collect taxes for the public good.

*Pay to all what is owed to them:*

*taxes to whom taxes are owed,*

*revenue to whom revenue is owed, (v7a)*

The difference between “taxes” and “revenue”

is essentially the difference between taxes and tariffs.

You pay property tax, sales tax, income tax –

but there are also tariffs – or customs, duties – charged to merchants who transport goods.

You don’t have to like what the government does with it.

In Paul’s day the taxes and customs

would have gone to fund the Roman army (with its unjust wars),

the bread and circuses for Rome,

not to mention lining the pockets of greedy tax collectors and politicians.

Corruption was rife throughout the system.

Bribery and kickbacks were the order of the day.

When you handed your money to the tax collector,

you *knew* that it was going to fund wickedness.

You don’t have to like it.

You don’t have to agree with it.

But when the government says “pay up,”

you need to do it.

And you need to do it honestly –  
otherwise you are robbing the servant of God.

Paul says,  
pay what is owed.

Not pay what you think is right.  
But pay what is owed.

After all, if you get audited,  
and it turns out that you knowingly and willfully withheld what was owed,  
then you have brought dishonor on the name of Christ.

Because Jesus said, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,  
and to God the things that are God’s.”

But it is not just money.

We are also to pay  
*respect to whom respect is owed,*  
*honor to whom honor is owed.* (v7b)

If they command you to bow before false gods,  
then you cannot do that.

Jesus is Lord.  
Therefore you cannot say that Caesar is Lord.

But under God, you must pay respect to the rulers of this land.  
You must give them the honor that they deserve.

No, I did not say the honor that *you think* they deserve!  
Rather, the honor that they deserve by virtue of Christ’s appointment.

It is not the chief justice of the supreme court who will institute Barrack Obama  
as God’s chief deacon in the United States.

Neither was it the American people.

God institutes all authorities.

Bush’s authority today,  
and Obama’s authority tomorrow,  
comes from God – not the people.

But God says to all the rulers of the earth:

*Now therefore, O kings, be wise;*

*be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:10-12)*

This may seem like a strange Christmas message.

And yet, as you gather with family and friends this week,  
remember that the baby in the manger is the King.  
And no, not just the king of some distant far off land,  
not just the king of some ethereal kingdom  
(that's not what Jesus meant when he said,  
"my kingdom is not of this world." (Jn 18:36))

No, Jesus is Lord.

The politics of the kingdom of God  
cannot be described in terms of republican or democrat.  
The politics of the kingdom of God  
do not hang on how you interpret the US Constitution.  
Rather, the politics of the kingdom of God  
are defined by that humble manger where Mary laid her child,  
by the good news of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed,  
and especially by the cross where the politics of this age  
thought that they had avoided the challenge of this king.  
The politics of the kingdom of God  
are displayed by the one who sold all that he had,  
gave to the poor, and followed Jesus;  
by the one who dropped his career and his ambition  
and gave up everything to preach the gospel;  
by the one who humbled herself to care for those who had nothing.

The politics of the kingdom of God are defined by the one  
who though he was in the form of God  
did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped,  
but humbled himself,  
taking the form of a servant, humbling himself to the point of death –  
even the shameful death of the cross.

When your King of kings and Lord of lords acted in this manner,  
you should not be surprised to hear that he demands the same from you!