

For the 10 years that I've served as the pastor here at New Beginnings Church, it has been my tradition every year to start the New Year off by preaching a topical sermon – a sermon on something that gives us direction or guidance, or a sermon that addresses a particular subject related to the life of our church.

This year, I want to use our first sermon of the year to talk about a church that has existed throughout the ages – one that goes back thousands of years, and which has existed in various forms and in various locations throughout the world. I'm talking about what's called "The Underground Church."

If you're not familiar with the Underground Church, it's the church that exists in places where there is such hostility toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ that the Christians in that location must meet secretly. What that usually means is that Christians are meeting secretly in private homes or basements, although there have been times when it's been more remote than that – sometimes it has existed even in caves and other places far away from civilization.

For example, in China, during Mao's revolution, it was illegal to be a Christian, and thus the Christians would congregate and worship in caves out in the countryside, and other various remote hideouts. The persecution in China eased for many years. From the 90's to the 2010's, persecution in China eased considerably. But in the past two years, that easing of persecution has reversed, and much of the Chinese church now once again worships underground.

The Underground Church doesn't only exist in China, however. It has existed in Russia, the Middle East, and in many other places where being caught worshipping the one true living God could land a person in a prison camp for many years...or where it could cost a person their life.

Let me be clear from the outset about why the Underground Church exists today and has always existed in places where worshipping God is either banned or where Christians are persecuted unto death. The underground church exists because Christians have an obligation both to God and man to defy tyranny. The underground church exists because nobody in the world, in all of human existence, has the right to demand that God's people not gather to worship Him.

It's hard to imagine that the church in our country would be forced underground. It's historically unprecedented. And yet, given what has happened over the course of the past year, I won't be surprised if we're forced to go underground very soon – and I don't want you to be surprised either.

Throughout the history of our great country, there has been a long history of peacefulness between the government and the church. But we should understand that, historically-speaking, this has been a very unique situation. Historically, the church has been regularly persecuted, usually due in large part to the mixing of church and state. Our country's founding fathers realized this, and that's why they put a clause in the First Amendment that was designed to keep the church and state separate. And throughout American history, there has therefore been peace between the church and state, and Christians have been able to freely gather and worship.

And then 2020 came along. In 2020, COVID-19 hit our country, and churches in many states were instructed to close. Churches here in Washington State were instructed to close. "Millions of people are going to die within a couple of months," we were told. "We need 15 days to flatten the curve," we were told. And closing down for a couple weeks seemed reasonable. But many larger churches immediately announced that they were just going to close down for the rest of the year.

Suddenly, there was a lot of discussion about whether or not EVERY church should just close down for the year. And there were many vocal people coming forward saying that shutting churches down voluntarily was required for loving our neighbors. One megachurch pastor argued that we should lay down our rights to gather and worship, since Jesus modeled that for us by giving up His rights as God, humbling Himself, and taking on human flesh. That's a really horrible argument. Jesus never disobeyed God in humbling Himself and surrendering His rights. And yet, to stop gathering to worship IS disobedience to God.

Others gained a lot more traction by arguing that Romans 13 instructs us to submit to the governing authorities. And on the surface, that might appear to be a very convincing argument. But as we examine it today, what I hope to show you is that neither the government, nor any other power that be, has the authority to instruct us to do what God has forbidden, or to forbid us from doing as God has instructed. Neither the government, nor any other power that be, has the authority to instruct us to do what God has forbidden, or to forbid us from doing as God has instructed.

Now, one of the worst things you can do when you turn to Scripture for answers and clarity is to isolate a text from its context. So let us understand the context of Romans 13 before we start studying it. We have to begin by understanding why

Paul included this passage, and not only why he included it in his letter, but why he put it where he did.

Paul spends Romans chapters 1 and 2 and the first half of chapter 3 demonstrating that every human being who has ever existed has fallen short of God's holy standards of righteousness. Between the middle of chapter 3 and the end of chapter 8, Paul explains that the only cure for our sin – and the way to be saved from the penalty of sin – is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. These chapters cover the subject of justification – how a person is found righteous in God's sight – and the certainty of God accomplishing all that He has ordained. That concept is fleshed out and illustrated in Israel's history between chapters 9-11.

Then we get to chapter 12, where Paul switches gears. He's covered justification – how sinners are brought into fellowship with God and forgiven of their sins – and starting in chapter 12, Paul starts a discourse on SANCTIFICATION. Justification is being released from the penalty of sin; sanctification is being released from the power of sin. In other words, from chapter 12 on, Paul is writing about how we should live in light of the reality that we've been brought into fellowship with God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. We've been saved; we've been forgiven – great, how then should we live?

Chapter 13 has everything to do with that particular question. Chapter 13 is there because it would have been easy for someone to have said, "Great, I'm covered by the New Covenant and freed from the Law of God (at least in its function of condemning us). Jesus has set me free, and in Him, I'm free indeed. If God's law no longer condemns me, then surely no law conceived by man has authority over me!" And Romans 13 is Paul's way of saying, "Not so fast."

Before we look at Romans 13:1-7, I think it's important to note that Paul spends 2 entire chapters – chapters 13 and 14 – explaining for us that while we're free from the condemnation of the Law of God, that doesn't mean that our liberty in Christ is a license to live in a licentious manner; that is, it doesn't mean that we can live without restraint. Along with our freedom in Christ comes certain responsibilities and obligations.

And so the purpose of this passage is to show us that God is sovereign over earthly authorities – they serve a good and pure purpose in God's economy, and because God has ordained the civil authorities (or "civil magistrate"), Christians don't have the right to set themselves above the civil magistrate.

And yet, let us understand this: the early church – including the apostles (and including even Paul) – was persecuted and fed to lions and put to death by the civil authorities because they disobeyed the civil magistrate. Indeed, we can be sure that the first century church was forced underground. So we can be clear about this much: Paul isn't saying, here in Romans 13, that we should just cheerfully submit to whatever the civil magistrate instructs us to do. Far be that from being the case. So what IS Paul saying here in Romans 13? When do we obey? When do we defy? Where do we draw the line? Let's look at it together, and see if we can find some answers here.

READ Romans 13:1-7

“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.” If we were to just stop there – if that was all that Paul had to say about the matter – then we would have to concede that we have an obligation to do whatever the government says. Because whatever Scripture says, we yield to, right? We might not like it. We might not fully understand it. But if Scripture says it, it doesn't matter what we think or feel about the matter, right? No question. So if this had been all that Paul had to say about the matter, we would be disobeying God to disobey the State, regardless of what the State demands of us. But Paul continues, first by telling us why we must be in subjection to the governing authorities.

“For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” Now, we have to understand that God has established different types of authority. First, He has established the family, where fathers are the head of the household. Secondly, He has established governing authorities. And thirdly, He has established the highest magistrate on earth: the Church, of which Christ is the head.

Every one of these authorities, or magistrates, has a role – a specific function that God has designed them to play in society, all for the good of society. And each magistrate derives its authority from God – not from self. In other words, God has given each magistrate power to enforce rules and laws, but none of them have the freedom to execute authority that defies God's law.

To that end, God ordains and establishes earthly rulers. On the surface, it might look like we appoint them, but it is God who ordains and appoints them to their earthly governing positions. And they are to rule in accord with the authority given that particular magistrate.

Paul continues, writing, “Therefore [in light of what verse 1 says, in other words], whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.”

We need to understand that Paul is describing a governing authority – or civil magistrate – that is operating within the guidelines and authority that God has established for that magistrate. In other words, this is describing a government that is exercising only the authority that God has granted them. So neither the lower magistrate (the family) nor the civil magistrate are interfering with the greater magistrate (the church). And, likewise, the church isn’t interfering with the functions given to the family or the government. Everyone is staying in their lane, so to speak. That’s what Paul is describing here.

And Paul says that if you resist the governing authorities, when they’re operating within their God-given parameters, you’re opposing the ordinance of God, and are worthy of the government’s condemnation. In other words, Christians can’t be anarchists. We’re not social rebels. We have an obligation to comply with a government that is ruling rightly and justly, staying in their lane.

When the governing authorities exceed the limits of their authority, that’s when they become tyrants. Francis Schaeffer writes this: “The state is to be an agent of justice, to restrain evil by punishing the wrongdoer and to protect the good in society.” By the way, who defines what is right and wrong? Good and evil? Only God. Those standards are revealed by His word. Period – end of story. Schaeffer continues, “When it does the reverse, it has no proper authority. It is then a usurped authority and as such it becomes lawless and is a tyranny.”

Before we continue, allow me to simply say that if we take these first two verses in Romans 13 to mean that it’s wrong to ever oppose government, we will immediately find ourselves at odd with significant portions of Scripture. And any time that happens, we can be sure that we’re not understanding correctly, because Scripture never contradicts itself. Consider, for example, the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1. They were commanded to murder the sons of Hebrew women upon birth. Does God condone such a thing? Of course not. And so the Pharaoh who commanded this was outside of his lane; he was ruling in a way that exceeded the authority given him by God. And what did the Hebrew midwives therefore do? They defied the order. Exodus 1:17 says, “But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live.”

The fact that God approved of this is reflected in what we see then in verse 20, which says, “So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty.”

What about Rahab, the harlot who saved the lives of the Hebrew spies? She’s even found in the 11th chapter of Hebrews as an example of a faithful servant. She defied her own king in order to save lives, and would have been considered a traitor by her people. And yet God commends her for her faith and work.

No, Romans 13 is not saying that we should just role over and do whatever the governing authorities do. If the governing authorities instruct us to do what God forbids, or if they forbid us from doing what God instructs, we have a moral obligation to defy the civil magistrate. That theme is found throughout the Old Testament, and we see it in the New Testament as well.

Consider what Peter said when he was brought before the Council in Acts 5. They arrested him and the other apostles, but then brought Peter before the Council and said to him, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” But, we read, Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” That principle is binding on every human being – but how much more binding is it on us, as Christians?

Paul continues, writing in verses 3-4, “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.”

Again, it is very obvious that Paul is talking about a civil magistrate that is staying within the limitations of its God-given authority. A government that is operating properly is not a government to be afraid of, unless you’re doing what is wrong. Wrong by whose standards? God’s standards – His standards are the only standard of what is good and what is evil. When the civil magistrate is operating properly, in accordance with God’s word, it is, Paul says, a minister of God. Their function – their PROPER function – is to protect those who do good and to punish those who do evil.

In other words, the civil magistrate only has the authority that God has given them. They are not free to make up their own rules and regulations, and they are never, ever entitled to require their constituents to do what is evil – either by forbidding that we do as God has instructed, or by demanding that we do what God forbids. Those appointed to positions of civil authority do not have the authority to defy God themselves, and they never, ever have the authority to instruct others do defy God either.

John Calvin notes of verse 4 here, “they are not to rule for their own interest, but for the public good; nor are they endued with unbridled power, but what is restricted to the wellbeing of their subjects; in short, they are responsible to God and to men in the exercise of their power.” To exceed the authority granted by God is, by definition, tyranny.

What we must understand, at this point, is that the will of God and the will of the civil magistrate are SUPPOSED to align, but that they don’t NECESSARILY always align. Civil magistrates have commonly exceeded their authority, historically-speaking. And when they have – when they’ve imposed tyranny on their constituents, it has never been good for society. It always leads to harm.

The civil magistrate is to govern in a way that protects those who do good, and to punish those who do evil. But what we’ve seen, particularly in the last year, is that the very opposite has happened in our State. Even when our President called for law and order, our governor, Jay Inslee, protected evil-doers. And if you don’t believe me, consider how many businesses were burned to the ground. Consider that the murder rate in Seattle skyrocketed. Consider that the lawless were protected. All the while, our Governor was imposing restrictions on those who do good – including churches – that he wasn’t imposing on those who were acting lawlessly. And he said that he was doing this because he didn’t want to violate the First Amendment rights of the lawless to protest. He had no problem violating the First Amendment rights of churches, though, did he?

Let’s add all of this up. A civil magistrate that protects those who do good and punishes those who are lawless and doing evil is doing what God has designed it to do. How do we respond to that type of civil magistrate? Paul tells us in the verses that follow. Verse 5 tells us that we’re to be in subjection to them, as long as they’re operating in accordance with God’s law. Verse 6 tells us that we’re to pay taxes.

Verse 7 gives us the principle that obligates us to do these things. Paul writes, “Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.”

Here’s where we need to pay careful attention. Notice that this is a general principle in verse 7, and not just a principle that applies to how we are to act toward the civil magistrate. We’re to fear those to whom fear is due? To whom is fear due? God, for one. God, above all! What if a civil magistrate demands that you not fear God? What if they instruct that you not honor him? We are obligated, in such a case, to defy tyranny. A civil magistrate that punishes or restricts their constituents from doing good while protecting evildoers is a tyrant. He is to be defied. And to be clear on this, what I’m saying about our own Governor, Jay Inslee, is that, by definition, he is a tyrant – he has threatened and punished those who seek to honor God, to whom all honor and glory are due, and he has protected those who have done great, great evil to our society. He has NOT governed in accordance with God’s decrees – he has done the very opposite.

Everything that we do in our church services is prescribed and/or modeled by Scripture. Scripture sets the precedent and foundation for everything we do, starting with gathering on the Lord’s Day. We gather because it is a sin to forsake gathering. We gather because, for starters, we have dozens of “one another” commands that can’t be obeyed unless we gather.

Our services align with what we believe Scripture instructs us to do. True worship relies on the instructions given in the Bible. We are instructed to pray. We’re instructed to sing. We’re instructed to gather an offering. We’re instructed to proclaim the Lord’s death and resurrection until He returns through the taking of the Lord’s Supper. We’re instructed to baptize new believers. Last, but not least, we’re instructed to preach and teach the Scriptures. None of this is something that we’ve just arbitrarily decided to do. We don’t lean on our own understanding like that. This is called the Regulative Principle of Worship. The Regulative Principle of Worship dictates that we worship only as Scripture has instructed – no more, and no less. Nothing is left to our whims and ideas.

Now tell me, who has the authority to prevent us from doing these things in obedience to God? Jesus said “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” Only He has the authority to instruct us to cease from what He has instructed us to do in His word. No earthly power has such authority. Jay Inslee has no authority to prevent us from doing what God has instructed.

The question becomes, what if he tries? And he has, hasn't he? We must defy. What if he threatens to shut us down? And this is where we go back to a principle I gave you earlier: the underground church exists because Christians have an obligation both to God and man to defy tyranny. The underground church exists because nobody in the world, in all of human existence, has the right to demand that God's people not gather to worship Him. Do we need to go underground? Not yet. But it's entirely possible that that day is coming for the American church.

Make no mistake about it: there will still be churches that are public and don't need to go underground. You can still find State-licensed churches in China. But if a church there wants to be faithful, they must gather secretly. Those who wish to be faithful must defy, even though they will likely be punished severely if they're caught. There's a perfect example of tyranny – the Chinese government punishing those who do good by obeying God.

There's some interesting and helpful insight that we can gain in Daniel chapter 6. In Daniel 6, we learn that Daniel has been appointed to a position under king Darius, and that Daniel was becoming very influential. In Daniel 6:3, we learn that, "the king planned to appoint him over the entire kingdom."

Verses 4-5 say this: "Then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him. Then these men said, 'We will not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God.'"

And so they come up with a plan, and present it in verse 7, where they say to king Darius, "All the commissioners of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the high officials and the governors have consulted together that the king should establish a statute and enforce an injunction that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lions' den." And king Darius went along with it, signing it into law.

What obligation did Daniel have to God? To worship Him. To pray to Him. But Darius had forbidden that Daniel disobey God. So what did Daniel do? We read this in verse 10: "Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously."

Here is a case where the rule of a king exceeded his God-ordained limits. This is textbook tyranny. And Daniel responds how? Does he say, “Well, I should just concede, since God did put king Darius in authority over me?” No. He defied the tyranny of the civil magistrate. And he defied very publicly. Notice that he didn’t close his windows when worshiping God – he kept them open, toward Jerusalem – for all to see. And he knelt down and prayed and worshiped God three times per day in a manner that sent a clear message to everyone – that the tyranny of the civil magistrate is to be defied when their orders contradict the commands of God.

He had been doing these things before the law was passed, but he didn’t stop after the law was signed. Why not? Because king Darius didn’t have the authority to forbid what God instructs, just like he didn’t have the authority to demand what God forbids. And neither does our Governor, nor does our President, nor does anyone possess such authority! We, like Daniel, and like the Hebrew midwives, and like Peter and the apostles, and have a moral obligation to defy tyranny.

I never thought that I would see the day when the church in America might have to go underground. It’s a scary thought. But I don’t think it’s outside the realm of possibilities within our lifetimes. The Government has no authority to dictate whom we worship, how we worship, or whether we worship, because God has not given the Government the authority to do so! We are never to act as though the civil magistrate has unlimited authority. Yes, we desire to live a quiet and peaceful life. Yes, we wish to be at peace with the State. We as a church have gone out of our way in the last year to comply with the Governor’s orders. But like Peter and the apostles, we must say, “We must obey God rather than men.”

We, as a church, exist for the purpose of making disciples – gathering weekly on the Lord’s day, preaching the Gospel, worshiping God in the manner prescribed in Scripture. We do it because Christ is the head of the Church, and that’s what He has commanded us to do. And what did Jesus say? “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” May God grant us grace, wisdom, courage, and protection to love Him that way: to love Him with a love that is uncompromisingly obedient to do what He has instructed, regardless of the cost or consequences.