

Romans chapter 13 is one of those passages that is both really easy to understand and also really hard to understand. On the one hand, it's easy because Paul is extremely clear. Be subject to governing authority. Rulers are put there by God himself. Pay your taxes, and so forth. It's all extremely clear what Paul is trying to say. But it's also a very difficult passage to understand because of the reality that we live in, of the things that we face each and every day and throughout history, for that matter. Because when Paul wrote the book of Romans, the Roman emperors thought that they were gods on earth. And throughout all of history, there have been all kinds of tyrants, men who abused their authority for their own personal gain. And we also live in a time when the government either encourages or even enforces things that are contrary to God's will. And so it can be very difficult for us to understand this. What exactly is God trying to say? And above all, what does it mean to submit to authority when that authority is evil?

To understand this passage, Christians, we first have to understand that this is not the only thing that the Bible has to say about worldly authority. And we need to take all of what the Bible says together so that we understand Romans 13 correctly. So in Acts chapter 5, for example, we meet Peter and the apostles standing in trial before the high priest. They had been preaching Jesus openly in the temple and had been thrown into prison because of it. And now they were standing before the high priest, and they heard the accusation, in Acts chapter 5, verse 28: "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." So what should the apostles do in this case? The worldly authority has told them to be quiet, to stop talking about Jesus in the temple. And if Romans 13 was saying that we had to listen to the authorities without exception, without hesitation, without any questions, then the apostles should've been quiet. But that's not what they did. Peter in verse 29 says, "We must obey God rather than men." The right thing for them to do in that situation was to ignore what the worldly authorities said and to listen instead to the Lord. They had to listen to God and what he wanted them to do, no matter what the authorities said. So we need to keep a passage like that in mind when we look at Romans 13.

Or take another passage, like Revelation chapter 13, which describes a great beast coming up out of the sea. This great beast is a symbol of worldly governments that fight against God's Church, worldly governments doing everything that they can to bring the Church down. And this beast is described in verse 7 in this way: "Also the beast was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them, and authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation." So what are God's people supposed to do in that case? What are they supposed to do in the face of an evil authority? They're not told to just submit to this authority, no questions asked. They are told, actually, to endure, to suffer, to stand firm even if it meant their very lives. That's what they were called to do. And if Romans 13 meant that they had to listen, they never should have done that. But that's not what it's saying. We are called to listen to God above all. And so we see in the Scriptures, then, that governments and worldly authorities are never presented as being only good or even just neutral. Governments can sin. Governments can fight against God. So we need to look at them carefully through the lens of God's Word.

So Paul is not saying, then, in Romans chapter 13 that we must submit without question. And he is not saying that the government can just do whatever it wants. Rather, what Paul is saying in Romans chapter 13 is that we should do what is right also when it comes to society. That we as Christians are called to do what is right even when it comes to worldly authority. Because you

could certainly misunderstand those other passages. Someone might hear what Peter says in Acts chapter 5--"we must obey God rather than men"--and think that that means, "Well, I never have to listen to government. I never have to listen to authority, because they are men, and I'm supposed to listen to God. So I'm free to do whatever I want." But that's not true. And someone might hear what Revelation 13 says about the beast and assume that that means that all government is evil, that all of it is bad, that government in itself, because it is the government, is something opposed to God. That's not true either. Authority is something which comes from God, and God gives that authority for a good purpose. Yes, it's true, men often abuse that authority, and they often use it for evil. But that doesn't mean that the authority itself is evil. God intends it for a good purpose. And so we have to learn how to separate the good from the evil. We have to learn how to know when to listen and when not to listen to worldly authority.

So Paul in Romans 13, then, describes what a government is supposed to be. He is showing what God's good intention is. It is an authority which has been appointed by God. God himself put that ruler in that place over us. Because God is a God of order. He is not a god of chaos. Government should serve a good purpose in creation. It should be there to punish evil, to keep it in check, to keep it from exploding out of control. And rulers are servants of God in that sense, or more specifically, servants of his wrath to keep that evil down. So the government then is supposed to punish criminals. The government is supposed to protect private property. The government is supposed to deliver justice. The government is supposed to bring judgment on the earth. Now, whether or not the government is actually doing that is not the point here. We're talking about what God intends governments to be. This is what they're supposed to do. Because if we didn't have these things, we would soon be in utter chaos. All of society would be torn apart. We would have no order at all. And that's not what God wants to happen. So rulers, then, bear the sword, as Paul says, the sword of God's judgment upon evildoers on earth. And for that reason, we should submit to them. We should listen to them, to do what is right and to do what is good in the world. Because we as Christians are not called to be lawless. We're not called to just totally ignore everything in the world. We are called to do what is right, and that includes submitting to worldly authority. This is what the government is supposed to be, and this is God's good and gracious will.

And for that reason then, Christians, the best ruler is a Christian, one who fears God and believes in him. As Psalm 2 says: "Now, therefore, O kings, be wise. Be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling." God wants rulers to believe in him, to follow after him. And so a truly Christian ruler is a wonderful thing, because he follows after God's will even in society. And it is a great blessing and a very wonderful thing and a godly thing when they follow after him and serve him to carry out his will. If we had a truly Christian government, it would be a blessing, and not just one in name.

But God also appoints and uses non-Christians for his purpose as well. Because when Paul wrote the book of Romans, the Roman emperors were by no means Christians, but they still served as servants of God. God had put them there for his purposes. And so even in the Old Testament, we meet Cyrus, who was a Persian king, one who did not know God at all. And yet Isaiah in chapter 45 could write: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus: . . . For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. I name you, though you do not know me." So God used this Persian king, Cyrus, who did not even know him, for his purposes, for the good

of his people, Cyrus was a servant of God. And as long as these rulers did what was right, God's people were called to submit to them, because this is God's good and gracious will.

But when a ruler does what is evil, God is going to judge them for it. And we are not commanded to obey them in that case. We must not obey them at all when they want us to sin. Because if we listen to the government in that case, we will be judged right along with them. Take the example of Manasseh from the Old Testament. He was one of the last kings of the southern kingdom of Judah, but he was also one of the worst kings that they ever had. And he led the people into all kinds of evil, into all kinds of idolatry. 2 Kings chapter 21, for example, says: "But Judah did not listen, and Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel." And because of this sin, not many years afterwards God sent the Babylonians to destroy the kingdom. King and people were punished together for their sin. And for that reason, we must not listen to rulers or to governments when they commanded us to sin. No matter what they say in that case, no matter what they try to get us to do, we must listen to God above all and do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

So how then do we know when to listen and when not to listen? We know, Christians, by listening above all to the Lord. Because we should listen to him without any hesitation, without any exceptions. And when we know what God says, then we will know when we should listen to worldly authorities. Then we will know when we should not listen to them as well. And when the government says something to us, we should always stop and ask ourselves: is this what God wants me to do? It's okay to be skeptical about what the government says. It's okay to take some time and think about it, because we need to compare it with what God himself says. And if it's not what God wants, then we have to listen to God without exception. The world, even the government, is always second to the Word of the Lord. And it may mean suffering because of it, certainly. The government may try to force us to do what it wants us to do. But God is our Lord and King, and we should listen to him above all. He is the one that we should not hesitate to follow after in everything.

So then, Christians, this is what Paul is trying to tell us in Romans chapter 13. Listen to the worldly authorities, listen to the government when it is right to do so. But listen to God above all.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have set the powers of the world for our good. Help us to follow after them when you want us to do so, but help us to follow after you no matter what. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.