

Lesson 32: Living under Secular Government

Romans 13:1-7

¹ Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.	(Exhortation) (1 st reason)
² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.	(Consequence)
³ 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; ⁴ 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.	(2 nd reason)
⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.	(Exhortation repeated)
⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for <i>rulers</i> are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax <i>is due</i> ; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.	(Concrete example of practice)

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Introduction

Douglas Moo writes, "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning (Moo, *NICNT Romans*. 806)." That's not surprising with a text that begins, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities," and ends with, "because of this you pay taxes."

I remember teaching this text back in the year 2000. I do not have that good of a memory. But there is a reason I remember teaching it. We were moving from Zagreb to Split and into a new apartment that was completely unfurnished. No oven, no refrigerator, no kitchen cabinets. We made a trip to Ikea (or for your Americans, Ikea) in Austria to buy the cabinets and other household items. I remember that agonizing decision at the Croatian border coming back of whether or not to volunteer information about what we were importing. I was not going to lie, but if I just kept my mouth shut, the guard might just wave me through. On the other hand, I knew it was my responsibility to declare my purchases. And I had Romans 13 blaring in my head. So, I rolled down my window and handed over my receipt.

Our lives are touched in hundreds of ways by the governmental authorities set up over us. From the local city council, the school board to state or county authorities to national authorities, in Europe, even supra-national authorities, the European Union. Our lives are affected by the decisions of these authorities whether by speed limits to trash collection or recycling or school zoning to the possibility of a military draft or federal taxes, our lives are affected.

And it's really hard to get out of the simple reading of the text, though we would love to. We don't want to get out of it just for the minor inconveniences or the minor expenses. There are serious issues that arise out of this passage. What do we do with an unjust government? What do we do with racist authorities or anti-Christian authorities? Or corrupt authorities? Or totalitarian authorities? Is Paul giving rulers divine right to treat their citizens however they please, and we are not to do anything about it? We are just to be sheep to the slaughter. Is Paul taking away the possibility of pushing back and calling, demanding change?

This is a short passage and it has a broad range of application from major issues of human government to the smaller issues of everyday life in human society. Paul recognizes the need for us to give serious thought to this issue. That's why he is offering it as one of his scenarios. If we are to present ourselves to God as a good and pleasing sacrifice, then we need to consider how our thinking about government has been formed by our own society and by our own sinful flesh. How am I thinking wrongly? To present myself in society in a godly way, I need to be in the ongoing process of having my thinking renewed, so that I might be transformed more into the image of Jesus, so that I can live in society with Jesus as my model. What does that look like? What basic principles ought I keep in mind?

As we interpret this passage, we will try to follow two principles. First, we will try not to make Paul's text say more than it actually does say. This is a very small passage on a very big theme. And it simply doesn't address so many of our questions. So, we want to recognize what is addressed here and what is not. Our second principle is in tension with the first. While trying not to read into this passage, we also want to consider the worldview framework that Paul teaches out of. What is Paul's view of how the New Covenant community relates to human government? The purpose of this second principle is to place the passage into the context of Paul's teaching. I will make some comments about the larger gospel context after we consider the more straightforward meaning of the passage.

So, in Romans 12 through 15, the scenarios of application are not given in a flowing argument or exposition from one topic to the next. Still, the different scenarios do seem to have a logical order. For example, it makes sense that the exhortations to sincere love follow the challenge to participate in the body of Christ. Paul did not take time to explain that connection, but the connection makes logical sense. If we are going to be a unified body and each one of us is going to be contributing from differences and different motivations, we are going to need genuine love to make it work. When I say the logical link is not tight, what I means is that Paul does not give us a flowing argument on the body and on love like he does in Ephesians 4, because his focus here is on application, not explanation. So, he gets right into the action. He is saying present yourselves as members of the body and present yourselves in love.

Now, the move to human government in the third scenario links back to the previous passage. In the exhortations to love, Paul made this statement. "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." Being told to leave vengeance in the hands of God, we might ask, "Is there no justice on earth?" And our current passage addresses that issue. Though again, this is not a long exposition. This is application. We are getting a short exhortation; not a sermon on Christians in government. And it fits with our model of respond, present and renew. So, responding out of a grateful heart, we need to present ourselves as citizens of a secular society, and in so doing, we need to renew our thinking about that. Paul does not overdo the thinking part here because his intent is to move us to action. He gives us enough to get our thinking going, leaving us with the challenge to come up with a more developed Christian response to government based on our understanding of the gospel and the broad teaching of Scripture.

This is how we will address this lesson. I will go through the text to clarify the clear exhortation. Then I will raise a few additional questions that arise out of the text but are not answered by the text.

Let's read Romans 13:1-7.

The Text

Unlike the previous passage, which had 20 exhortations, this passage contains one primary exhortation. It is fairly straight forward. "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Paul repeats the exhortation in verse 5. "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake." In between these two statements of the primary exhortation, Paul gives us two reasons for obeying the exhortation and one statement about the consequence of disobeying. Then Paul finishes the passage with a concrete practical application of the exhortation. Let's walk through the passage.

The Exhortation To Submit to Governing Authorities (12:1a)

Again, our primary exhortation is the first part of verse 1. "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Paul makes the exhortation inclusive. He does not say that some people should be in subjection. You know, the better drivers don't need to be in subjection, just the bad drivers. No. He says, "every person." It may be important to notice that he does not use the word obey in reference to government. He uses the word submit. We will come back to that later.

The First Reason to Submit to Governing Authorities (12:1b)

Paul follows up his exhortation with a reason. We should submit to the governing authorities because "there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." This creates a problem for us. Paul is saying that human governments outside of theocratic Israel have been established by God. In our previous text, Paul told us to interact with people in society. He said, "respecting what is right in the sight of all men (12:17)." I commented then that the Christian stance toward secular society is not a stance of absolute good versus absolute evil. We are told to recognize a moral impulse towards good that exists in human societies. And we are to build bridges on the common ground of generally recognized morality.

Here Paul indicates another reason we should not view human society in absolute categories. Paul is not naïve. He does not have in mind that Roman government is particularly good or somehow anointed by God. Paul understands the evil in human society. But he also recognizes that God reigns over human institutions. No government exists, and no ruler holds his or her position without God permitting it to be so.

The Consequence of Not Submitting to Governing Authorities (12:2)

In verse 2, Paul describes the spiritual consequences of not submitting to government authority. "Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves." This is Paul's view of spiritual reality. To resist governmental authority is to resist God. The condemnation here is not the condemnation of the government. It is the condemnation of God. God views resistance to governmental authorities as unrighteous, as not good, as wicked. Refusing to submit to governmental authorities is an act against the social order established by God.

The Second Reason to Submit to Governing Authorities (12:3-4)

In verses 3-4, Paul comes back to another reason for submitting to governing authorities. "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil."

Paul's statement begs the question, "What about unjust and evil rulers? What about prejudiced authorities?" We will have to come back to that question. It was surely a question on Paul's mind as one who had been beaten and imprisoned. And it would have been on the minds of the Romans who experienced in recent years the unjust expulsion of Jewish Christians leaders, like Priscilla and Aquila, who were kicked out of Rome. They were aware of the misuse of authority.

So, we are to take Paul's teaching as wisdom based on spiritual reality. There are general principles, when followed, that lead to a fruitful life. And this is a basic principle of wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Proverbs direct us to wise decision making based on a clear view of reality. Living wisely over time most often results in positive outcomes. Proverbs are not formulas that guarantee a specific outcome. That's the entire point of the book of Job, the man who lived a righteous and wise life and did not experience the fruit and the blessings promised by Proverbs. It is not a formula or guarantee but a recognition of spiritual reality and a choice to live accordingly.

Paul's first statement of reality was that authorities are dependent upon God for their position. Paul's second statement of reality is that governing authorities are pragmatic enough to leave alone, even honor, citizens who live according to law and basic moral goodness. Here is the rest of the text.

"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.”

In spite of the prejudice he was subjected to as a Jew and as a Christian, Paul believed in the principle that doing good is generally recognized as good by authorities and doing evil attracts the negative attention of the authorities. We should interpret good and evil here, particularly in terms of law and order in society. Being hard-working, respectful of all men, a peacemaker in relationships, taking care of your parents and your children, treating cautiously and respectfully soldiers carrying swords, these are types of behaviors generally recognized as good in society and approved of by governing authorities. Theft, smuggling, public fighting, abandoning your family, desecration of temples, debasing authorities, these are some of the more obvious evil behaviors that would bring down the wrath of authorities. Human governments want order and stability. Often that is a good thing all around.

Paul describes the governmental authority as an avenger of wrath on the one who practices evil. This does not mean that governmental authorities are therefore good. In chapter 1, we considered the case of Habakkuk who struggled to believe that God's plan of salvation included Babylon as the avenger of wrath against wicked Judah. God said, “Believe it.” And he was clear that the use of Babylon to bring about punishment was not based on the goodness of Babylon. They were not righteous heroes. They refused to accept their role as coming from God. They continued in their pride and idol worship. They abused their power. And they were punished later for it.

Paul is teaching us that God uses sinful people to bring about a certain degree of order in society. There is a basic pragmatic response by authorities to approve of good and to punish evil. Evil in the mind of authorities does not line up perfectly with how God defines evil. Authorities will include in their definition of evil that which threatens their power, or their prestige, or their position. It may include a moral basis, or it may simply be the pragmatism of a politician or ruler. They have their own definition of evil. Still, it will overlap in many ways with God's definition, both because the image of God still leaves a moral imprint in people and because true morality is pragmatic for society. God uses human agents to maintain a certain amount of order in society.

Now, we also saw back in chapter 1 that God's wrath is currently being revealed against human beings in a passive form. God gives us over to a darkened heart and mind. The resulting consequences are a form of God's wrath. He leaves us to the harm of our own rebellion. If there were no ordering principle, we could imagine terrible chaos. We might wonder why human society is not better. I usually wondered why human society is not much worse. Why don't we tear one another apart? That's a complex question for each society, but it comes down to at least two principles we are seeing here from Paul. God has given humanity over to sinful passions and a darkened mind, but God has not given us over fully. God allows a moral principle to still work in the hearts of people. His image still has effect. And God has provided some degree of order in society, according to his wise plan. If God pulled away completely, we would be much, much worse off both as individuals and as societies.

God has placed a restraining principle in us and a restraining principle in our society. He calls us to something much better. Just as individuals can choose to live according to God's revelation of truth, to live as God sees reality, so too, societies can be ordered in such a way to reflect truth. We can see the positive effect on societies as they move towards a godly perspective. As with people, this is always messy. Sin and Satan are always at work, opposing the truth of God. In some cases, God allows greater reign of sin and Satan in a society. Those societies give us a picture of what all society would be like if God did not allow his image to still work in us, and God did not ordain better authorities. So, just as the gospel shakes us to think soberly, “You know what? I could be just as bad as the worst among us.” The gospel also challenges us to think soberly that our society could devolve from its current state to the level of the worst societies that we have read about in history class. If it

were left to us without the grace of God and the hand of God to curb our sin, we could be much, much worse.

In this text, Paul also adds to our picture of the execution of God's just wrath against human evil. We know there will be a final day of wrath where justice is fully satisfied. And we know from chapter 1 that God submits us to a passive wrath by giving us over to our own sin. In this passage on government, Paul adds another agent of God's wrath. God uses governing authorities to bring about the active wrath of justice in our present lives. It precedes the eternal justice that will come on the day of judgment. And as deficient as humans are in carrying out God's justice, God still works through people to bring about a form of justice.

Paul's phrase "for it does not bear the sword for nothing" could be used as support for capital punishment. I do not think, however, that argument stands up under scrutiny. The Old Testament law provides more direct support for capital punishment. That's where you should go if you want to argue capital punishment. We can hardly say that capital punishment is necessarily evil, since God clearly taught that it was the righteous punishment for human society in certain situations, particularly in the situation of Israel. We could argue that the New Covenant brings about a change. Or we could argue that the Mosaic punishments do not apply well to secular government. But those arguments are beyond our current passage. I don't want to talk about capital punishment right now. The reason I do not believe this text is a direct support of capital punishment is that the sword was seen less as an instrument of execution and more as an instrument of enforcement. So, if we say that police officers do not carry guns for nothing, we are not supporting punishment by shooting. We are pointing out the right and need for policemen to enforce the law, hopefully without ever having to use their guns. So, the reference to sword here is more likely a reference to the power to enforce law and to enact justice and less likely a specific reference to the kind of punishment that would happen, to execution.

The Exhortation To Submit to Governing Authorities Repeated (12:5)

In verse 5, Paul summarizes the exhortation. "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake." We, as Christians, argue for the voluntary submission to governing authorities for these two reasons. One, God uses governing authorities to punish evil behavior in society. This is the reason for fear. God curbs the damage of sin in society by ordaining government. Two, since God has ordained government, submitting to governing authorities is submitting to God. This is more rightly the gospel motivation. We recognize by faith that the governing authorities are servants of God. Paul uses here the word *diakonos* or servant, which he usually uses for Christians serving God and from which we get the word deacon. So, though they may not know or acknowledge that they are his servants, Paul sees governing authorities as providing a function ordained by God and having significance in God's plan.

Concrete Example of Practice

Paul ends this passage with an example of concrete practice. Paul's first words can be taken two slightly different ways. "For because of this you also pay taxes..." could indicate an ought statement. Since, it is right to submit to governing authorities, both out of fear and out of conscience, you ought to pay your taxes. The second option is to take Paul's words as an affirmation of what the Romans are already doing. They are already following their conscience in this matter. Paul is essentially saying, "This is the reason you are paying your taxes." This second option aligns better with Paul's Greek here (Moo, *NICNT Romans*. 804).

I do not know if Paul felt that paying taxes was a particular issue for the Romans or not. I think he is assuming that they are paying their taxes, because they do recognize that they ought to be paying taxes. We don't need to see this as a special case the Romans struggled with. I think it is an issue for everybody. Who wants to pay taxes? When we talk about submitting to the governing authorities, Paul's giving us an example that hits us all. It's a great general application.

I just went yesterday to my local tax office in Zagreb to submit my American income tax forms. I have to pay taxes here and in the US. Which does not work out too terribly, since I get to write of the Croatian taxes on my American tax form and the American taxes on my Croatia tax form. But I still do not like to pay taxes. I don't like giving over the money, and I don't like the time it takes and the trouble. And the system is not set up well for foreigners. When I first tried to pay the lady receiving my papers looked at me like I was an idiot. She asked, "Are you sure you want to do this." I said, "Yes." She hesitated with her hand over her computer keyboard, communicating to me that once I was in the system there was no going back. And I said, "Yes, put me in." And she did and that was it. I said, "Yes." for both reasons Paul mentions here. I was afraid how much money I would owe the Croatian government if they came after me. And my conscience before God was pushing me to obey this text. I believed it was what he wanted me to do.

This is what we do as Christians. "For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 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." We do this as an expression of faith in God, showing to him that we believe he has ordained government authorities for his purposes. We recognize his hand over secular government. We submit to him when we submit to them.

Thoughts for Further Discussion

That's the passage. And though this passage gives us a straightforward exhortation that we can put into practice right away, it also leaves quite a number of questions unanswered. Some questions are too big for our present discussion. I am not even going to bring them up. I was thinking, "What forms of government best model a biblical world view? That's a great question, but I am not even going to try to answer that one here. Though I will slip in that I am a fan of governments that recognize human sinfulness and so create a separation of powers. That's the idea of putting biblical principles into practice. But we can't get into all that, "What's the right kind? Or what's the best? Or what's the most Christian form of government?" Great question.

Here are three other questions I'd just like to begin to answer, just raise.

1. What about unjust, prejudice or oppressive governmental authorities? Do Christians simply obey?
2. Shouldn't Christians work to transform society?
3. What is the relationship between the church and secular society?

What about unjust, prejudicial or oppressive governmental authorities? Do Christians simply obey?

Paul does argue for submission to governmental authorities, and Paul is aware that those authorities do evil things. He experienced himself officially sanctioned beatings and jail time. He knows that he exhorts submission to regimes that may provide good for society, but also do evil. He still says submit. He is not saying, "Submit to good government authorities." Because we will never find them. He is just saying submit. It's like when you submit to your father. You are just supposed to submit. Must we then understand Paul as saying obey in all things and take whatever the government dishes out.

Well, not necessarily. It is interesting that Paul chose the word submit rather than obey. Submission shows acceptance of an ordered hierarchy of authority in society. Submission does not require the belief that the one being submitted to is always in the right or is acting out of godly motives. We can choose to submit to a higher authority even when we disagree with that authority or when we question the motives of that authority.

Submission as Christians, however, always assumes an even higher authority to whom we owe first loyalty. We recognize only one God and one divine King. That was a huge problem for early Christians in the Roman Empire required to worship Caesar. They could not. And the government viewed that harshly as a forerunner to rebellion. We submit to God first and only to human authority second. Now, we are going to argue this makes us good citizens, because our God in heaven has instructed us to submit to earthly authority, so we are prepared to contribute to society as though we were serving God.

But this means we do not obey in all things. We ought not submit to governing authorities when we are ordered to act in a way that is evil or contrary to a clear moral command of God. Peter and John provide an early Christian example of civil disobedience. When the Jewish governing council commanded Peter and John, "Speak no more to any man in this name," Peter and John responded, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19)."

Martin Luther King, Jr. devoted intense thought to a biblical theology of civil disobedience. He wrestled with how to submit to governing authorities while also standing up for justice. In his 1963 *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King wrote, "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law." Dr. King was prepared to take the consequence of his civil disobedience in a manner very similar to Peter and John.

Dr. King also held deeply that the means do not justify the ends. He called Christians to civil disobedience against racial injustices that were directly contrary to the biblical teaching of equality. Leading others from his understanding of the gospel, he reasoned, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies (King, *"Loving Your Enemies."* 1957)." That's the gospel. In his argument for submission to a higher authority, it combines the genuine love passage of Romans 12:9-21 that we looked at in the last lesson with respect for human authority from Romans 13:1-7.

This are only some introductory thoughts on the issue of unjust government. There is a lot more to think about. It's not easy to answer. These are hard questions. But let me go ahead and introduce the next one.

Shouldn't Christians work to transformation of society?

Dr. King gives us an affirmative answer to this question. "Yes. Christians should work to transform society?" And I think we all agree. Christians value order in society and also work towards the positive transformation of society. Christians ought to work for all kinds of change in society: for religious freedom, for protection of unborn children, for racial equality, for equal treatment for men and women, for help for the poor, for protection of the vulnerable, for end of corruption in government, and on and on.

And while we are promoting positive change in society, we must not forget to keep the main thing the main thing. The primary mission of the church is not the transformation of secular societies. We can consider Paul and Peter and James. What did they go to prison for? What did they write about in their New Testament writings? What did they speak about, according the record in Acts? It is imperative that the church keep the main thing as the main thing and let other things flow out of that. Paul has spent here seven verses speaking about government. Before that he spent eleven chapters writing about the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the good news and the gospel is all about Jesus. In this life and the next, salvation is not in government, and it's not in human society. Salvation is in Jesus. Jesus is the greatest need of every man, woman and child. Love demands that we keep the message of Jesus central to our preaching and to our mission. Paul started this letter proclaiming how happy he was to come to Rome to preach the gospel. "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, [...] for in it the righteousness of God is revealed." In the conclusion of this letter, he says that he has preached the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum and he can't wait to go on to Spain. Paul's mission is not primarily the transformation of human society but the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment of gospel communities within society.

Paul has not indicated in this letter that he sees the proclamation of the gospel as leading to the transformation of society. You don't see that here. Paul emphasizes the transformation of the people

of God within society. And it does not mean that Paul does not hope for positive impact on society. It is not an either or. Either we care for the poor, or we preach the gospel. Either we protect the unborn, or we preach the gospel. Either we protest racial inequality, or we preach the gospel. It is a both/and with the important recognition that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is primary. It's foundational. Everything else is built on that, it comes out of that. We are responsible to society to keep the main thing the main thing. And that's clearly demonstrated in this letter by Paul. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the growth in love of gospel community. From this gospel community, we then seek to have an impact on the larger society, both in the further proclamation of Jesus Christ and in the promotion of what is righteous and true and good and just in the sight of God.

Now this leads right into our third and final question.

What is the relationship between the church and secular society?

I am going to come at this question from the broadest of strokes.

God is Lord over all human society. The covenants of Adam and Noah still stand. Those were covenants with all men and women. There is a common grace kingdom to which every human being belongs. God does not prevent these societies from perpetrating evil. He has given human beings over to themselves. But then God also does not leave human society completely to itself, to chaos and evil and anarchy. First, God gives rain and sun on all. He maintains a suitable, beautiful environment in which good and evil people live side by side, both receiving blessing. Second, God has not fully removed his image from human beings. There is still a moral impulse in people that curbs some evil and brings about some good. Third, God provides order in the form of human society with ruling authorities. These are human authorities. They are a mix of good and evil. God is providing for the common grace society.

God's authority over the common grace kingdoms is seen in the prophets of Israel, who mostly direct their commands to Israel and to Judah, but who also frequently direct their judgments to surrounding nations. Because God is god of all, curse and blessing are pronounced for superpowers like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon and regional powers like Philistia, Moab and Edom. God is still the God of the superpowers that dominate the global scene today, and he is God of the regional powers that surround whatever nation you live in. He is God over the common grace kingdoms. If he wants Nebuchadnezzar to reign, Nebuchadnezzar will reign. And if he wants Nebuchadnezzar to go mad like a wild animal, Nebuchadnezzar will go mad like a wild animal. God directs the hearts of kings. God is in control.

After the Tower of Babel incident, God decided to go with a divide and conquer strategy. He would call into being a new nation, a special grace kingdom. He made covenant, first with Abraham, then with Moses. This special grace kingdom was to be a light to the common grace kingdoms. With the coming of the Messiah and the end of the old covenant and start of the new, the special grace kingdom changed forms. It is no longer the geo-political nation Israel, but the spiritual community of all believers in Jesus Christ, the church. We are a kingdom within a kingdom, the church within a nation.

Everyone who contributes to the well-being of the common grace kingdom serves God, whether they do so with awareness or not. This is true because the common grace kingdom exists for the special grace kingdom, that is to say, secular society exists for the church. Secular society provides roads and sewers and electricity and food production and transportation and health care and civil administration, and law and justice, and all the infrastructure and services necessary for human society to exist. That blessing of common grace society exists for the furtherance and growth of the church. Consider the blessings provided by Rome, order and roads and a common language over a vast territory, all of which served the mission of the church in the proclamation of the gospel in its early initial spread.

So, every Christian, if you work in what we might call a secular job, you are not a full-time Christian worker or missionary, you are working for God, building up the common grace kingdom, building

society, building the infrastructure that allows us to live, and even gives a context for the special grace kingdom, for the church. So, Paul can say that governing authorities are also ministers of God. This is not a wholesale validation of their actions. It is a recognition of the importance of the common grace kingdom for human beings and for the church.

We can also say that the special grace kingdom exists for the common grace kingdom, that is the church exists for secular society. I mean that is this way, God has instructed us not to separate ourselves out of society. We are to be a light to the world, a city on a hill. We exist to proclaim the glory of God and to call everyone back to true worship and to relationship with him.

Whether your primary vocation is for the building of the common grace kingdom or for the special grace kingdom, all of us who believe contribute also to the primary mission. We contribute to the mission of the special grace kingdom by living out the gospel wherever we are. And we contribute by offering ourselves as members of the body, giving our time and gifts and resources to God for the growth and mission of the church, of the gospel community.

So again, I am just touching on how the church relates to secular society. And you may have a different way of formulating or viewing this within the biblical story. I am just trying to get your thinking started. Let's wrap it up. You can think on these things later.

The command to submit to governing authorities and pay taxes is not hard at all to understand. What's hard is thinking rightly about the command in the face of some challenging issues. It is yet another area where we need to continue to present ourselves for service in the manner that we believe honors God and to continue to renew our minds so that we ourselves are transformed and better able to discern how to live for God in whatever society he has placed us.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 13:1-7?
2. How does this text relate to free speech? Does submitting to governing authorities mean that you have to agree with authorities? Does submitting to governing authorities require a certain amount of respect in communication about authorities? Is it right to verbally degrade current ruling authorities even when you disagree with their policies?
3. How does this text relate to civil disobedience? Is it ever right for Christians to disobey law established by governing authorities? If so, when? And if so, in what manner?
4. If governing authorities serve God in bringing order to society, do the other jobs contributing to the welfare of society also serve God? How do you understand your own role as a Christian in your current vocation? In what sense are you a servant of God?