# SERMON SERIES:

# PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES 2

**“What Is The Relationship Between Christians And Government?”**

## *Romans 13:1-5*

We’ve reached the end of our sermon series “Problematic Passages 2.” I want to thank you for the great feedback and encouragement I’ve received over the past month of this series. There’re still plenty of strange, controversial, troublesome, and confusing passages to be found, so who knows―we may be revisiting this series again somewhere down the road!

Throughout this series we’ve talked about tools that we can use when we come across a problematic passage. We’ve said that we should always let Scripture interpret Scripture―seeing what else the Bible has to say about words, phrases, or concepts in the text, and how they might shed more light on what we’re studying. We’ve said we should consult trusted biblical resources to aid our understanding, as well as considering the social, historical, political, and religious backgrounds of the text. We should determine what’s at stake in our passage―whether it’s crucial to our faith and lives, or whether it doesn’t carry quite as much weight. And we always have to pray, stay humble, and be open to the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Let’s turn to our Scripture reading for this morning, Romans 13:1-5. Our final passage relates to a question that all of us have struggled to figure out. This issue’s taken on even greater importance over the past few decades as the political climate in the United States has continued to deteriorate; as politics have become weaponized; and as society has grown increasingly polarized. What is the relationship between Christians and the government?

*Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.  2So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished.  3For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you.  4The authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God’s servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.  5So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.*

Let me begin by saying that this is a complex issue and we can barely scratch the surface of it this morning. It’d probably take a full sermon series just to discuss the basics―and there’d still be miles of questions, perspectives, interpretations, challenges, and possibilities to unearth. So this is just a drop in the ocean.

What are we to make of biblical passages such as Romans 13:1-5? How are Christians supposed to engage with secular authorities? How can we know if a politician or government has been authorized by God to rule? What are Christians to do when the governing authorities don’t act in the best interest of the people? Where does civil disobedience come in? Should Christians run for and hold public office? These are just a few of the hundreds of questions we can raise about this issue.

We can’t answer them this morning. But we can do a little digging and find a few things to think about. Some scholars don’t believe that Romans 13:1-7 was written by Paul, but was added in by someone else at a later date. Other scholars believe 13:1-7 to be authentically Pauline and that’s the position I’m going to use.

Paul stated, *Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.* Let’s consider a couple of possibilities surrounding this verse. First, the earliest Christians believed that Jesus would return at any moment. His resurrection had inaugurated the world-to-come that would be finalized at his second coming. We know from 1st Corinthians that a form of Christian extremism existed that had people getting rid of their possessions and going to wait on mountaintops for Jesus to return. Second, there’s also evidence, again in 1st Corinthians, that some early Christians believed they had already “arrived” at the apex of spirituality. They imagined they were better than other Christians because of their supposed spiritual maturity. ***They might have said, “Well, the old age has passed away; we’re a ‘new creation’ in Christ and as such are no longer bound by earthly restrictions or responsibilities.”*** Paul may have been letting such believers know that they still had an obligation to secular government as long as they were on this earth.

A third possibility is that there was something specific happening in the Roman church that necessitated these words. Again, we know that very thing happened in Corinth so there could’ve been a need to address the issue of Christians and government among the Roman church.

In 1st Peter 2:13-17 we find something very similar to the passage in Romans 13. Peter wrote, *13For the Lord’s sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state, 14or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right. 15It is God’s will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you.  16For you are free, yet you are God’s slaves, so don’t use your freedom as an excuse to do evil.  17Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Fear God, and respect the king.* Paul wrote Romans around 55 AD. Peter composed his letters about ten years later. Both encourage submission and respect toward legitimate ruling authorities. Yet by the time of the letter of Revelation―about thirty to forty years later―Rome and its government were pictured as demonic, unholy, and antithetical to Christians.

We must understand that in Romans 13:1, Paul mandates “submission” to the secular authorities. ***To submit is to recognize one’s subordinate place in a hierarchy. It’s to acknowledge that certain persons or institutions have authority over us. I must submit to the bishop of the Holston Conference because he or she is above me in authority. Arnie must submit to the authority of the judge in court because the judge is over him in authority.***Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul instructed Christians to submit to their spiritual leaders (1st Corinthians 16:16) and to one another (Ephesians 5:21). He called on Christian slaves to submit to their masters (Titus 2:9), and Christian wives to submit to their husbands (Colossians 3:18, Titus 2:5).

In this Romans passage, Paul used the Greek word for ‘submit,’ not the word for obey. Linguistically, the two Greek words have similarities which could cause translators to use one over the other. But the two words are also different from one another. Paul instructed Christians to *submit*―that is, to recognize that government institutions have authority over us. He did not advocate blind obedience no matter what. ***Today, we might not like the president for one reason or another and we may choose not to obey him. But we’re to submit to the authority of the office regardless of who sits in it.*** That’s what Paul was getting at.

Judaism believes that all authority comes from God. Christianity believes the same. Behind every secular authority is the authority of God. We believe that God has placed people in positions of authority, and they wield that power as an extension of God. When they wield their power properly, all is good. But when they abuse their authority, they longer represent God.

At several points in the Old Testament, God used other nations and leaders to carry out his will, often without those leaders even knowing it. So Paul warned the believers in Rome that if they persisted in anti-government attitudes and practices, there would be a price to pay: *2So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. 3For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you.  4The authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God’s servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.*  In other words, secular government has power―and the authority―to enact laws and maintain order, for the betterment of society and for punishing those who seek to destroy society. Undermining that authority is working against the plans and purposes of God.

Obviously, Christians shouldn’t frivolously disregard civil authority. We seek to honor and keep government laws because we know they maintain order in society. We want to be good citizens as well as good Christians. And ultimately, since God is the supreme Source of all authority, we submit to our government as a way of pleasing God. Paul phrased it this way: *5So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.* “Keeping a clear conscious” here refers to the believer’s knowledge of God’s will and purposes. Christians submit, not only out of fear of punishment, but because we know who’s ultimately, totally, completely sovereign: God.

***So was Donald Trump the president God wanted the United States to have? Is Joe Biden the president that God wanted the United States to have? Maybe. Possibly.*** I cannot say definitively because I don’t fully understand all the complexities of a Christian’s relationship with government, nor of how God chooses to distribute authority. As I said at the top, we can’t even begin to scratch the surface this morning.

We all know that our government has grown increasingly corrupt, bloated, and out of control. It spends more money than it brings in, and consequently carries unmanageable debt. Bribes, shady deals, and preferential treatment for big donors are common. It’s so top-heavy that it cannot sustain its own weight. ***All these things were also true of Rome in the first century AD, when Peter and Paul were writing their letters. Citizens of the Roman Empire back then had the same questions, frustrations, and anger towards the Roman Senate as we have today toward our Senate and House of Representative.*** Historically, it would only be a few centuries after Peter and Paul before Rome finally fell. Perhaps the United States government is headed toward the same fate? Who knows? Only God.

So what’s a Christian to do? I don’t know. I don’t have an instruction or practical application to give you. ***It’s all become so gigantic and overwhelming that the average person feels like a leaf caught in a flood.*** Christians have always had a peculiar relationship with government. In some places, governments persecute and kill Christians for practicing their faith. In others, a handful of leaders want a version of Christianity that *they* approve of, ***like ISIS or other religious extremist groups***. Some want no religion in government. Others want Christian principles but not theocratic laws.

There’s so much more that we could say and explore, but we don’t have the time. I know this message hasn’t answered any of your questions or concerns, and I’m sorry I don’t have more to offer. But this is a difficult and complex issue with no quick and easy answers. If nothing else, maybe it will push us to keep digging, to keep asking, to keep evaluating, and to keep praying.

**ASK: Now, before we conclude, does anyone want to say something, raise a question, or offer a perspective?**

Let us pray: *Sovereign God, who used King Nebuchadnezzar and the nation of Babylon to further your will, we admit our inadequacy when it comes to understanding our relationship with our government. We’re proud of our country and thankful for its freedoms―but we hate the sinfulness that permeates it and drives it. We don’t know what to do or how to respond. It’s too big for us, God.*

*But thankfully, it’s not too big for you. Despite our feelings about presidents and Congress and the Supreme Court, about taxation and submission and obedience, we must take heart that it IS all under your control. We would ask that you show us how to make a positive impact in our government at every level. Tell us how to pray and what to pray for, so that our nation doesn’t have to follow in the footsteps of Rome, but can move out of the darkness and into a new light of national hope, prosperity, goodwill, and peace. This we ask in the name of Jesus, who said to give to Caesar what is his, and to give to you, Lord, what is yours. Amen.*