

## **GOVERNING AUTHORITIES OWE THEIR HONOUR TO GOD**

**Today's Text: Romans 13: 1- 7**

### **Extracts:**

***Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment to themselves.... Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour [Rom. 13: 1-2, 5-7]***

*On 13 April 1655, Louis XIV, the longest reigning King of France (1643-1715) appeared before the French parliament to respond to their questioning of the legality of the decrees that he had signed concerning the French-Spanish war.<sup>1</sup> Surprised, the king exclaimed, "L'Etat, c'est moi!" [I am the State!]. Like the European monarchs of his day, Louis believed in the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings which held that kings ruled by the grace of God. Therefore, they derived authority from God and were only answerable to Him. It was the duty of subjects to endure whatever evils rulers saw fit to inflict on them. With the onset of the French Revolution in 1789 and modern democratic practices that it has bred, the doctrine of Divine Right has bowed to "people's power." Yet, people have only succeeded in replacing monarchs with dictators and corrupt democrats, especially in the developing world. So, the question remains: what is the appropriate response of subjects to their governing authorities? Why should they pay taxes to governing authorities who do not care about their welfare or well being?*

*In this week's Bible verses, Paul reiterates that every soul must be subject to governing authorities because they were appointed by God for His own purposes. That puts the believer in the middle of the battle! Governing authorities owe their honour to God but what should the believer do to such rulers who do not honour God or serve their subjects? This week's study will help us to sort out many things!*

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<sup>1</sup> Story based on the following sources: "Louis XIV of France," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27etat\\_c%27est\\_moi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27etat_c%27est_moi) and comments of "L'Etat, C'est moi!" by Starvo, Wed., May 09 2001 and Nounq, Thur. May 07 2009, <http://www.everything2.com/title/L%2527Etat%252C+c%2527est+moi%2521>

## 1. Background: The divine rights of ruling authorities

During the week of His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was confronted by the chief priests and elders of the people about His teaching, and they asked Him, “**By what authority** are You doing these things? **And who gave You this authority?**” [Matt. 21: 23]. Before that, a few years earlier when Jesus had selected twelve apostles from among His disciples, He “gave them **power and authority** over all demons, and to cure diseases” [Lk 9: 1]. On the day of His ascension into heaven, Jesus said to His disciples, “**All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth**” [Matt. 28: 18]. From those references, among so many others, we learn that **power is not the same thing as authority** and authority, the subject of this week’s study, is given by a higher power.

**When you occupy a position, there are certain things that you can do (power) and certain things that you should or should not do (authority).** Power comes from being the incumbent in a certain position or office. Authority, on the other hand, comes from what the law or rules permit you to do. For example, as king of Israel, David had the power to sleep with any woman he fancied, as he did with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. But he was wrong because he had no authority (from man or God) to sleep with another man’s wife [2 Sam. 11: 2-4, 27]. God is All-Powerful but He has no authority to judge the world. That authority has been given to Jesus the only begotten Son of God [Jn 5: 22]. Jesus as God is All-Knowing and yet, He does not know the day or the hour of His return to judge the world. That authority belongs to His Father [Matt. 24: 36]. **People in leadership positions run into trouble with the law or others when they act outside of their authority.** That is called abuse of power. Therefore, this week’s study is important to all of us who constitute governing authorities.

You are part of the governing authorities by virtue of the positions you occupy as:

- Parents or heads of families;
- Unelected or traditional rulers, such as kings, queens and village elders;
- Political leaders in government or the opposition;
- Appointed heads of institutions, such as judges, teachers, soldiers and civil servants; and
- Religious leaders

To such people, society has placed a great responsibility to maintain in perpetuity civil order and good governance. That is not easy, and unless such people have the grace and blessing of God, their task can be quite thankless. That is where Paul’s words in this week’s Bible verses ring loud and clear. Paul was writing to “all who are in Rome” [Rom. 1: 7]. At the time, the strong iron grip of **Roman emperors** ruled the then known world. *Pax Romana*<sup>2</sup> meant strict adherence to Roman laws and values. Dissent was crushed, not negotiated or mediated. The

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<sup>2</sup> The long period of peace and stability that existed under the Roman Empire, especially in the 2nd Century AD –*Encarta Dictionary: English* (North America)

*local Jewish leaders, civil and religious*, were not any better. Apart from instigating insurrection against the Romans, they persecuted the followers of Jesus. ***Those were the governing authorities in Paul's days***. They were not any better than those that we have to deal with today. Therefore, Paul's message is as relevant today as it was over two thousand years ago.

Paul is asking us to submit to governing authorities for the following reasons:

a) *Their authority comes from God*

Paul wrote [**Rom. 13:1-2**]:

*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.*

When you ask yourself, "Why should I obey those in authority over me?" you may not have a complete answer! For example, a little child may obey her parents because of her favourite candy or fear of punishment. Students dread their stern principal. People in general fear government because of its enormous powers and resources. Therefore, in addition to legitimate reasons (rules and regulations governing acceptable conduct), people also weigh the odds of winning in the event of dissent. That is what portends insurrection, rebellion or revolution.

The point Paul is making here is that rulership is much more than at our convenience. It is ordained and ordered by God "for exaltation comes neither from the east, nor from the west nor from the south, but God is the Judge; He puts down one, and exalts another [**Ps. 75: 5-7**]. It is not in our place to question why but to simply accept God's plan. For example, in spite of His harsh words for their hypocrisy, Jesus told His listeners, "***The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do***, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do" [**Matt. 23: 1-3**]. At Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the high priest Ananias ordered those around him to strike Paul on the mouth. Paul cursed him, questioning why he commanded him to be struck contrary to the law. When somebody chastised Paul for reviling "God's high priest," he quickly apologized, saying, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people'" [**Acts 23: 1-5; Ex. 22: 28**]. ***So, no matter how bad is the incumbent, you must respect the office.***

b) *They are to use such authority for God's purpose*

Governing authorities must in turn respect their offices “for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil.” They are God’s ministers for good “but if you do evil, be afraid, for [they do] not bear the sword in vain; for [they are] God’s minister[s], avenger[s] to execute wrath on him who practises evil” [Rom. 13: 3-4]. Governing rulers are for God’s purposes—to reward good and punish evil. That is why soldiers can kill in battle and not be charged with murder. That is why judges can take vengeance on the wicked by handing out prison or death sentences to the enemies of the state and other citizens. That is why parents and teachers can correct their erring wards. That is why a priest or pastor can stand on the pulpit and condemn immorality in the congregation even though he is equally a sinner. They are doing what God has appointed them to do for Him.

In sum, Paul is saying that the legitimacy of earthly governing authorities comes from God. Without such a sanction, there will be no uniform code of acceptable conduct or behaviour. Adultery, for example, could be condemned here and celebrated elsewhere. Murder could be punished there but rewarded here. The whole duty of man on earth is to fear God and keep His commandments [Eccl. 12: 13]. *By appointing governing authorities and enjoining us to obey them, God has made it easier for His will to be done on earth.*

## 2. What you owe ruling authorities

When we cannot help it, we may find it easy to accept the foregoing. However, one day, we may be strong enough to win our independence. For example, our parents lose control over us when we move out. Our harsh principal cannot discipline us again when we graduate from school. Our wicked bosses cannot come near us again when they retire or are transferred. Do we still owe them any responsibilities? Yes! Here are some of them, according to Paul:

### a) *Pay your taxes*

Paul writes [Rom. 13: 5-6]:

*Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing.*

It is remarkable that believers who religiously pay their tithes will be so reluctant to pay due taxes at all or on time. That is informed by their biases against the less privileged beneficiaries of state welfare or the morbid fear of the high-handedness of tax authorities. Tithes and taxes are similar in the following respects:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Taken from “Giving,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No 3: 4 Feb. 2001; [http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_2/PDFs/GIVING.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/GIVING.pdf)

- Tithes are paid to Christ, a Priest of the order of Melchizedek [**Heb. 7: 1-28**], the Head of the Church [**Eph. 5: 23**], not to the governing authorities of your denomination. Therefore, whether they are prudent or wasteful, you still have to pay your tithes. In like manner, taxes are paid to the state, not to the government of the day. Therefore, whether you like the political party in power or not; or perceive that they will spend it wastefully; you must still pay your taxes.
- Tithes are paid only by income earners, except that the rate is fixed at 10%. In like manner, taxes are only paid by income earners (from salaries, profits, dividends, etc.) in proportion to their earnings.
- Without the tithe, the work of God through the churches and other organizations will be stifled and the devil will have a field day. Without tax revenues, it will be difficult to provide and maintain public services, such as defence and security forces, educational and medical facilities, social welfare, etc.
- When you do not pay your tithes, God says that you are a robber [**Mal. 3:8**]. You are a thief who has broken His commandments [**Jam. 2:10; Ex. 20:15**]. Of course, you also owe God the full tithe that is delayed plus an interest of 20% [**Lev. 27:31**]. In like manner, if you cheat on your taxes, the tax authorities can prosecute you and send you to jail. In addition, you must pay the tax due with interest.

At Capernaum, Jesus paid temple taxes for Himself and Peter [**Matt. 17: 24-27**] and yet, He never saw eye-to-eye with the temple leaders. So, you too must pay because God requires it of you!

b) *Be subject to authority*

In addition to paying our taxes, Paul also enjoined us to render customs to whom customs are due, “fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour” [**Rom. 13: 7**]. One mark of being a true believer is **humility, the ability to willingly give up your rights for the benefit of others or to acknowledge that other people deserve your respect**. For example, you must address people by the official titles that everybody else uses, even if such people were your former subordinates or juniors in school. You must respect their present positions or offices in formal settings.

Take the example of King David on his death bed, when he was told that Solomon (on his instruction) had been anointed king by Zadok the priest. The priest came in with Nathan the prophet and told David that his servants had come to bless David saying, “May God make the name of Solomon better than your name, and may He make his throne greater than your throne.” What was David’s response? We are told, “Then the king

bowed himself on the bed” [1 Kgs 1: 41-47]. He made himself subject to the authority of the incoming king! He thanked God for the privilege.

Remember also what Jesus told John the Baptist when He came for baptism. We are told that John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” Jesus replied, “Permit it to be so *now*, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” [Matt. 3: 13-15]. Jesus was superior in spiritual ranking but at that point in time, John was the baptizer! Jesus subjected Himself to his control.

From the foregoing, we learn that *the conduct of people that are governing authorities over you is not your responsibility but what you do by them is strictly yours and God will judge you for it*. You are to respect their offices and do for God what their offices deserve. *However, they owe God the honour due to Him. If by their conduct they give God a bad name among the heathens, they will have to account to Him by themselves*. The Roman Empire that persecuted Paul and his colleagues received due respect from them as faithful followers of Christ. In due course, the empire through its governing authorities adopted Christianity as its official religion!

### 3. Conclusion: God honours those who honour Him!

God has said, “Those who honour Me I will honour, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed” [1 Sam. 2: 30]. Jesus has added, “Whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father in heaven” [Matt. 10: 33]. A governing authority that acts in accordance with authority honours God and His Christ. To act otherwise is called an abuse of power. That is why *it is power that corrupts, not authority*.

So, for those subjects that are daily affected by the actions of the governing authorities placed over them, do not be discouraged. Play your part to satisfy your God. Pay your taxes as and when due. Give honour to whom honour is due. Respect those to whom respect is due. Count opportunities, not costs. In due season, (by death or rapture, whichever comes first) Jesus will appear as your King of kings and Lord of lords. At that time, you will have nothing to worry about any longer. Therefore, governing authorities owe their honour to God, not to you!