

Respect for Authority

Titus 3:1-2

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Many professional sports have begun using video replay and other technologies as a way of double-checking officiating on the field. It's valuable to ensure that critical calls are correct, and most people have appreciated the technology. What has surprised me the most about the introduction of these technologies is how often these referees and umpires get the call right. In situations where I wasn't sure what the right call is watching frame by frame in slow motion, they often manage to get in position and see the right elements in real time.

At the lower levels of sports, we don't have the benefit of video replays or challenges. Instead, we rely on community members being paid a small stipend to officiate youth sports. Often, people show no respect for these individuals. This has led to a profound shortage of officials. Many in the crowd believe they can do better, but they're unwilling to put on an official's uniform and actually do it.

In our passage today, Paul talks about the importance of showing respect to those in positions of authority. This is an increasingly unwelcome message today, as we often feel our leaders are not acting in our best interests, and disagree with many of decisions they make. We aren't looking at many verses today, but Paul's instructions have broad implications for Christians around the world, but especially in America today.

Submit

Paul begins chapter 3 with these words,

Remind the believers to submit to the government and its officers. They should be obedient, always ready to do what is good. (Titus 3:1, NLT)

Paul tells Titus to *remind* the believers to submit to the government and its officers. Titus wouldn't be teaching them something new but reminding them of what they already knew. This is not surprising, since Paul says much the same thing in several other places, so we can assume he had touched on this issue when he was in Crete originally. It also shows us that the issue of citizens being frustrated by their government is not new! This was something both Paul and Jesus addressed many times.

Now, some people balk at the inclusion of the word "government" in the NLT, because in many other translations, it just says to submit to "rulers and authorities." From what I've been able to glean, both translations are correct. The underlying Greek words are the words for "rulers and authorities", but the implicit meaning of those words would have been understood as referring to the governing authorities, as well as any others in positions of power.

Why

Before we get into how we should submit to governing authorities, I want to address the question of why we should. Paul doesn't elaborate much in Titus, but I think there are several reasons Paul emphasized submission to government authorities.

First, it would keep the church from becoming a target. The church was in its infancy. Christians did not have protection from government interference under the law. If they set themselves up as an opponent of the government, they would find themselves on the wrong side of the law and face significant persecution.

Paul was not saying this because he feared the government's power. He knew he had far greater power on his side. He was looking at a bigger picture. He understood that if governing authorities viewed Christians as obstructionists, they would lose all credibility. If they wanted people to respect them and hear what they had to say about Jesus, they needed to extend respect first.

Second, authority comes from God. When Paul speaks about this issue in Romans, he reminded the Romans that those in seats of power in government were given that power by God. They are supposed to wield their power for good, but even when they don't, Paul said to submit to the authorities God put in place.

We bristle at this concept in America. The thing we value above all else is our freedom to do what we want. People of every political persuasion get upset when they feel the government is overstepping and beginning to meddle in our lives. We struggle to obey and respect authority figures when they do things we don't like.

But if God has placed authority structures in our lives, the basis for our obedience to them is not our agreement with them, it is recognizing their God-given power. If we think we only need to obey authority when we agree with it, we will begin to do the same with God's Word, or with spiritual authorities. When we submit to governing authorities, we are submitting to God, who instituted those authorities.

Third, it testifies to the gospel. Most people today imagine they get to determine what is right and wrong. This shows up in the way we deal with the government, but also in the way we deal with one another, and even with God. If we willingly submit to human authorities, we gain credibility when we call people to submit to God's authority! We demonstrate that we all must answer to the authorities over us.

If we want to be able to reach others with the gospel, we must submit to the authority structures God has put in place. That means submission to our government, local leaders, our bosses, and even officials at sporting events. We don't have to agree with every decision they make, but we do have to respect them and submit to their authority.

How

Having talked about why this submission is necessary, we should also talk about how we do it. Paul tells us to be obedient and to always be ready to do what is good. This is

where things get difficult, because often we don't agree with the decisions our government leaders are making. Trust in our government is at an all-time low. We generally do not trust that those in positions of power are trying to do what is best for the citizens they serve. But that is not always fair or accurate. Let me give you some points to consider.

Sometimes decisions are more complex than we know. If an issue arrives at the state or federal legislature, or on the desk of the President or governor, it's because it's complex. There are usually many moving parts, and we often aren't privy to all the elements behind those decisions. What seems nonsensical to us might be perfectly reasonable when you have all the information.

Sometimes there is a difference in emphasis, not belief. I believe most people who get into government do so (at least initially) because they want to make things better for the people they serve. Admittedly, some become more concerned with serving themselves than their constituents, but I still believe most are trying to get good things done. But often we differ in the best way to accomplish that. Healthcare is a good example. Everyone agrees that people should have access to excellent medical treatment, but we disagree on the best way to make that happen. We may differ in our approach, but we are still seeking the same goal.

We would be well-served to give our governing leaders the benefit of the doubt, believing them to be people who are generally trying to do what is right, even if their emphasis is different than ours.

But what does it look like to submit to governing authorities? **First, Paul mentions obedience.** This is pretty straightforward. We should follow the laws of our land unless doing so causes us to violate God's laws. There may be laws we don't like. There may even be laws we think are unjust or evil. But the only time we are permitted to violate the laws of the land are when following man's laws would cause us to violate God's.

Let me give you two examples that illustrate this point. Jesus was whether Jews should pay taxes, since the Jewish people hated Roman rule and felt that the Romans were a corrupting and occupying force. Jesus' solution was elegant in its simplicity. He asked for a coin and asked whose inscription was on it. The religious leaders responded that Caesar was on the coin. Jesus said they should give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. He didn't say they could choose not to pay their taxes if they felt the Romans were being oppressive, or if they disagreed with the way they were used. He simply said they should submit to the governing authorities that were in place. He was gently reminding them that while they disagreed with many things the Roman government did, they also enjoyed many benefits from Rome. They should be good citizens and pay their taxes—even if they felt the Romans were corrupt or evil.

On the flip side, Peter and John were told by the Sanhedrin that they must not speak the name of Jesus. There was no way for them to follow God's commands (to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth) and the Sanhedrin's commands (to keep silent about

Jesus). So, they disobeyed, fully aware of the fact that the governing authorities could punish them for doing so. But they knew it was imperative for them to obey God first, no matter the cost.

The biblical principle is to obey the laws of our land, unless doing so causes us to violate God's laws. There are not exceptions for if we don't like the laws, if we feel they overreach, or even if we feel they are wrong. If we can obey both God and men, then we should.

Paul's second instruction is **to be ready to do what is good**. This seems like a strange statement. Why would we not be ready to do what is good? Because sometimes doing what is good is hard! Sometimes doing what is good opens us up to ridicule. And it's almost always easier to complain than to do what is good.

We, as Christians, recognize there are many problems in our society. I often pray that we will be part of the solution to these problems. This requires us to engage with our world, not merely complain about it from the sidelines. This can take various forms:

- Praying for leaders of all stripes—especially the ones we disagree with.
- Engaging and conversing with people who hold different convictions than us rather than attacking them or calling them names.
- Taking leadership roles, in our community or in our government, and striving to demonstrate what Christian leadership looks like.
- Exercising our right to vote and endeavoring to choose leaders who will recognize their responsibility before God and govern accordingly.
- Talking to our friends and neighbors about our faith so they know the truth.

Many are happy to complain. Few are willing to work toward a solution. As Christians, we should be willing to do things that will bring positive changes in our world—even though those things are often difficult.

Interacting with Others

After talking about the need to submit to governing authorities, Paul moves into a broader application.

They must not slander anyone and must avoid quarreling. Instead, they should be gentle and show true humility to everyone. (Titus 3:2, NLT)

These commands apply to the way we engage with our governing authorities, but also to the way we engage with one another. **First, Paul says we must not slander anyone.** Slander is when we tear someone down with our words. It doesn't matter if what we are saying is true, if its intent is to tear a person down, it's slander.

Practically this means a few things,

- We should carefully examine claims about people before sharing them. This is rampant online. Someone makes a claim, and if it matches with our preconceived notions, we believe it and pass it on. We should be measured in our responses

(both online and in real life), choosing not to jump to conclusions, and instead to gather information from all sides before we start talking about others.

- We should examine our motives. When you catch yourself starting to complain about another person, ask, “Have I talked to them about this?” Many times we aren’t looking for resolution to our issues (because that requires too much work), we’re simply looking for people to agree with us. This is a slanderous attitude. We should seek to solve problems, not perpetuate them.
- We should refuse to participate in gossip. When others try to draw you into gossip, politely tell them you don’t want to be part of it. It will usually only take a few times of doing this for them to stop.
- We should give others the benefit of the doubt. We often assume people’s motives when we really don’t know why they are doing what they are. We do this with political leaders, with spiritual leaders, and in our own homes. Until you have clear evidence to the contrary, choose to assume the best possible motives in people, instead of the worst.

The second instruction Paul gives is to **avoid quarreling**. Quarreling is a word we don’t often use anymore. Basically it means fighting. Paul is not saying we can’t disagree. We can, and often, we should. But we must do so in a way that is productive rather than destructive. When we resort to name-calling, raising our voices, threats, or passive aggressive behavior (like the silent treatment), we are quarreling, not engaging in productive disagreement. another. We should be gentle and respectful of one another, even when we disagree. We should adopt the same tactics both in the church, and as we engage with our world.

The last instruction Paul gives is to **be gentle and show true humility to everyone**. Gentleness is about the way we approach people. Gentleness doesn’t mean we affirm everyone’s point of view, or that we don’t say hard things. Gentleness is about our attitude, our tactics, and our heart. A gentle person seeks to defuse conflict, not inflate it further. A gentle person does their best to not hurt a person, even when saying hard things. And a gentle person works to communicate love, even in disagreement.

Paul tells us that gentleness comes from humility. Humility is often misunderstood. Many imagine that humility means downplaying our strengths. That’s false humility (and it’s usually a way of fishing for compliments...which is prideful!) True humility means taking an accurate view of ourselves. Again, I made a list of what humility looks like.

- Recognizing we may not have all the information and being willing to revise our position when we’re wrong.
- Believing those who disagree with us aren’t dumb, but may just be looking at things differently, or even see something we don’t.
- Remembering that we are works in progress and showing patience with others who are in-progress too.
- Being quick to show grace and to forgive, remembering that we often need the same grace and forgiveness.
- Keeping in mind that if it weren’t for the Lord moving in our hearts, we would be utterly lost, just as many in our world today are.

When we look at ourselves honestly and accurately, it should make us softer people. Pride makes us hard. It makes us assume we know best, and that everyone else needs to get on our level. A humble person recognizes they have much to learn, they could be wrong, and the Lord is still working in them. This is what Paul commends Titus to teach the church in Crete, and I believe what he would hold out to us as well.

Conclusion

This passage is controversial, because what Paul says in these verses runs contrary to the pattern of our society today. We have become quick to attack, quick to anger, and show little respect for our government leaders (or any leaders for that matter). Most of the media we consume feed this tendency (even some “Christian” media). As such, we have many barriers to hearing Paul’s instructions. But his guidance is essential in our current climate. So I’ve got a few applications we can draw from this passage.

First, be respectful of those in leadership positions. We will not agree with everything our leaders do, but we should respect the people God has placed in those positions. Instead of calling them names, speak about them with respect. Instead of mocking them, pray for them. Instead of labeling them as a liberal, fundamentalist, or socialist, examine what they have to say fairly. Refuse to fall prey to the rage-baiting of our world today and try to understand why leaders do what they do. Not everything is a conspiracy, and many disagreements are more a matter of emphasis than fundamental differences. God has placed these people in their positions, even if they aren’t acting like it. Respect the authority He has instituted rather than mocking it.

Second, be part of the solution. Taking pot shots is easy; trying to fix things is not. If you’ve been in a position of leadership, you quickly learn things often aren’t as clear-cut as they seem from the sidelines. Be involved in the political process by voting, and maybe even by serving in political office. Engage with people with whom you disagree rather than calling them names. Many of our issues today are a result of people talking about each other rather than to each other. Choose to be part of the solution.

Finally, strive to be humble in all your dealings. Paul reminds us that if we are believers in Christ, we know we aren’t always right. We know we aren’t perfect. And we know that we often don’t see things as clearly as we might imagine. We should adopt an attitude of humility in our dealings with others, because that will lead us to be softer and gentler. And it is far more likely to yield positive results.

Above all, Paul points us to the fact that these behaviors present the gospel to the world. If we want to reach the world with the gospel, we have to show them respect. If we want to testify to God’s authority, we start by submitting to the authorities He has put in place. If we change our approach, we lend credibility to the gospel, and that can bring about real and lasting change.

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