

## Faithful Politics, Week 3 — What are Governments For? A Biblical Theology of Civil Authority

*Key Questions: Why, according to Scripture, do governments exist? What role do they play in God's purposes for the world? How should Christians relate to civil authority?*

**Romans 13:1–7:** [1] *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. (ESV)*

### 1) What does this mean?

First: Authority comes from God. Ultimately, any real authority is derived from, and accountable to, God himself.

Second: God establishes civil authority to punish what is evil and praise what is good.

Doug Moo: *“Government is more than a nuisance to be put up with; it is an institution established by God to accomplish some of his purposes on earth.”*

Therefore, our default posture should be one of honor, respect, trust, and deference.

### 2) How far does this go?

This raises some deeply uncomfortable questions: what about authority used wrongly? Does following Jesus require blind allegiance or uncritical submission to any authority we happen to be living under? No, and Scripture is proof:

- Exodus 1: Hebrew midwives resist Pharaoh's orders to kill baby boys
- Daniel 3: Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego refuse to worship golden image of Nebuchadnezzar
- Acts 5: when asked by the authorities to stop preaching the gospel, the Apostles say “we must obey God rather than man”

John Stott: *“whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's Law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty.”*

Dr. King's “letter from a Birmingham jail” illustrates this well: if we find ourselves in a position where obedience to Jesus *requires* disobedience to civil authority, even this must be done in a posture of respect, love, and “a willingness to accept the penalty.”

### 3) Additional considerations:

What does this mean for citizens of a republican democracy like ours?

How do we navigate the tension between the need for civil authority to sometimes bear the sword, and Jesus' teaching on nonviolence?