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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: The Christian and the State

Transcribed Message
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Romans 13:1

It might be hard to imagine as we come to Romans 13, we are going to get to once again ascend to another Mount Everest type experience. If you've been with us for these many months, some would say years, in the book of Romans, if you've been with us you know that we've had opportunity to climb more than one mountain, to climb more than one Mount Everest as we have ascended into some of the greatest truths that we have in all of the Scriptures. And we get to do that again as we come to Romans 13. I am reminded of Paul's words in Galatians 6:9 where he tells us not to be weary in doing good, for in due season you will reap a harvest if you do not quit, if you don't grow weary or tired. So here we go. We get to do it again this morning. When we come to Romans 13, we begin this new section that is made up of these opening seven verses and what I want us to see this morning, and this is a principle that we'll carry on in these weeks to come, but it lays the foundation for us. The default position for the Christian in every age and in every setting is to submit to the God-ordained state, or maybe even borrowing rather from Paul's own language, to the God-ordained authority.

A quick review. Some of you maybe haven't been with us for a lot of the Roman study; others have. So let's catch up as we began together this new section and just take a quick look back at Romans 1 to 12. We said when we started this book that the book of Romans is Paul's magnum opus. It's like his greatest work. It's one of the greatest letters in all of the new Testament. It's one of the greatest expressions of God's truth that we have in all of Scripture. So it is often called Paul's magnum opus.

The theme of this book is that we would see the righteousness of Christ. The righteousness of Christ would be seen to us, it would be revealed to us. Romans chapter 1 verse 16. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it [that is in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. As it is

written the just shall live by faith. And so that became really the launching pad for all of what Paul has revealed to us by the Spirit of God in Romans.

As we look at that outline, once you get past the opening 17 verses which constitutes the introduction and you began in 1:18 and you go to 3:20. In a sense you almost hate to say it, but this is the Mount Everest of the doctrine of depravity. It is almost like it's the devolution. It is the downward cycle of humanity having left their first place. And yet that's what Paul does in that opening section. He shows us that we're under the condemnation of sin.

But then the glorious truth comes next of the matter of justification. He steps into justification at 3:21 all the way to 5:21, telling us that we now have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ based on what Christ has done. Then he goes into the doctrine of sanctification beginning in chapter 6 all the way to chapter 8 verse 13. And then we go to glorification in chapter 8:14 to 8:39. Then he steps into that interesting section of chapters 9, 10, 11 where he develops God's relationship with His chosen people Israel – their past, their present, and yet even their future. Then we come to the section that we've been in now for a bit on the church and our relationships to each other and the world. When we come to that, we see Paul's transition then into chapter 13 and verse 1. It introduces us to this very important subject of the church in relation to human government.

I would suggest to you that if you took a continuum and you just said let's explore together what does the history of humanity look like with regard to human government. It might look something like this. On the far left you have just anarchy and on the farthest right you have totalitarianism. You have all kinds of things in between there. Ways in which men have risen to power and have governed the people under them. If you look at that continuum that stretches from one end to the other, you look at that and I would suggest that when you come to Romans 13 that there two things that we want to keep before us. One is the relevance of the word of God.

The relevance of the word of God. I guess I would add to that not just the relevance of the word of God but the authority of the word of God. We want to always see ourselves as living our life under the authority of God's word. Never over it but always under it.

Then I think the other principle that we see and we'll explore further as we go is that the Christian life is possible. The Christian life is possible across that spectrum, across that continuum. And you say to me how do you know that? I say to you we know that from Scripture and we know that from history. We know that from experience. Even in Scripture we have this truth illustrated so that when you go to the far end and you're looking at anarchy all you have to do is read the book of Judges. That book ends with the very statement everybody was doing what was right in their own eyes. What is that? That is anarchy. And yet what did God have? God had every time a core group of people. He always had His small remnant that He was still working through. They were living out their faith. You go all the way to the other side to totalitarianism, and you have a man like Nebuchadnezzar, one of the most powerful and yet one of the most brutal men who ever governed. And you swing all the way to the other side of that and what do you have there? You have Daniel and his friends who are living out their Christian faith in the midst of the most difficult kind of setting that you can probably imagine.

I say to you this morning that as we go into Romans 13, there are these two guiding principles that I hope we'll keep before us. One the relevance and yet the authority of the word of God. These are not to be our ideas. We don't get to come and do what we want with the text. We have to submit ourselves to it.

And then the reality is God's calling upon His people. For all of human history has been to place them in every imaginable circumstance. I don't think it's too far off to say that from the perspective of Scripture and from the perspective of God's calling on His people to live out their faith, I don't think it's off the mark to say that the Bible does not necessarily put its stamp of approval on any particular political system. Do we enjoy living life in a constitutional republic? Of course, we do. Do we enjoy the privileges that we have as American citizens? Of course, we do. But I'm not sure that you can turn to the Bible and say here is God's stamp of approval on this specific form of government, because He always calls His people to be faithful no matter what their circumstance might be.

With that little background, let's look then further at this matter of the church in relation to human government. That really leads me to say what I've kind of been emphasizing that this is an exceedingly important issue in our day and time. I think the

relevance of this section will be very evident to us. It will challenge us. I'm probably going to say some things, maybe I have already said something that you're just not altogether quite sure that you agree with. I can assure you there's going to be some more of that coming. It almost reminds me a little bit of last fall when we looked at the role of women in the church and were reading the text out of 1 Timothy 2 and were looking at that. We acknowledge what it says but we don't like what it says. We do all kinds of things to rearrange what it says. I think there's a little bit of that at play here in Romans 13 that is going to challenge us in regards to those things.

Let's do this together. Let's begin by just setting the context because the context begins with this connection between chapter 12 and 13. We might look at this and we might think there's not a connection. We might look at this and all this seems to be very disjointed. Paul's been talking about all these things in the 12th chapter and then all of a sudden you get to chapter 13 verse 1 he is talking about government. Almost to the extent that there are some who have a lower view of Scripture than probably you and I do who say that Paul didn't even write this 13th chapter. Somebody just stuck it in there at a later time. It doesn't seem to them that it has any connection. I think it has a very specific connection.

Let's look at the connection between these two. We acknowledge that it is often true that the chapter breaks in our Bible are not always that helpful. We understand that when God gave us His word, it did not fall from heaven in a nice leather-bound 66 books with chapters and verses all marked in it. Chapters and verses weren't added until the 12th-century. For our use in especially a setting like this or in small group study we would be lost if we didn't have chapters and verses. That's why a couple of guys many years ago came and added chapters and verses, but what happened when they did that they didn't always help us out with the flow, so we come to the end of the 12th chapter and it's almost like Paul is starting out in 13:1. I would say to you that that last verse, verse 21, in fact 19 to 21 of chapter 12, is a perfect introduction to what he is going to say because he is talking there about how you relate to your enemy, how do you relate to those who are opposed to you. what is your response as that as a child of God when there's persecution coming into your life? That fits perfectly when he goes right into 13:1.

The second thing we would note is this is really a continuation of chapter 12 verses 1 and 2. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God that you would present your body as a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God which is the most reasonable thing you can do. This chapter is very much a continuation of that. This is the living out of that lesson. We're living in a world that is committed, it is hell-bent on pouring us into its mold. That's exactly the way Paul begins that 12th chapter. Don't let them do it. Stand firm in your faith. There's no more relevant issue than to come in chapter 13 and say again this is how the church is supposed to relate to government. This is how you as a child of God are to relate to the authorities that God has placed over you. So you see, it is really that continuing thought from chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 that really comes before us here as we seek to understand this chapter.

Thirdly, the chapter widens the circle farther. Back in chapter 12 verse 3 Paul says as he starts to us individually, he says don't think more highly of yourself as you should. That's a small circle. That's you and me. The Spirit of God says to us individually start off this journey by not thinking more highly of yourself than you should think, and then he widens the circle out and he includes other believers in your life and even believers that you are having struggles with. We looked at that. And then he widens it further and he says yeah, there are people in the world who don't like you and they oppose you and they're your enemies. Then he widens it out even further by saying how are you thinking about the government that God has placed over you. You see the circle widening farther and farther out. It's the living out of mercies of God that is a part of this ever-widening circle. Even how we relate to government is to be seen in that light.

Number four, and I feel compelled to add this one just because of the season that we're in. The issue that won't go away. Taxes. When you're talking to people about what does this wider circle of submitting to the government look like, everybody's raising their hand asking that question. Even Jesus got the tax question. Today here we are just two days away from the big day and our taxes are going to be due. He's going to say even in this section pay your taxes to those whom you owe taxes. It's a very specific application.

Then the last one. The issue ultimately is Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord. This wasn't some vague nebulous issue to these 1st century Christians who are getting this letter from the apostle Paul. I can assure you as they were sitting as we are and they were hearing that letter from Paul that we call Romans being read to them and they came to this 13th chapter and this first verse, this was real life to them. Who is Lord in your life? They lived in a culture, they lived in a society that was requiring them to say Caesar is lord. Your livelihood, your life is going to depend on your willingness to say Caesar is lord. And yet here Paul is calling on them to recognize that he may be lord, but he is lord with a little "I". Jesus is Lord and that is with the capital "L". This is the authority that Paul calls us to see ourselves as being under.

So secondly, let's look for a moment at the biblical doctrine of human government. This is what God has established. If you just looked at the history of how the church and how the religious institutions have related to government, I think you'd see over human history four kinds of patterns, principles that have developed in that regard. Let's look at those very briefly before we jump into this first verse. One of the first things that happened was the state simply controlled the church. The state controlled the church. That was certainly true in the Middle Ages in Europe, especially with the king as the head of the church. The church was required to be in obedience to the state and that's still true today. Think of Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church came out at the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine with his blessing on the invasion that was occurring in the Ukraine. Why do you suppose he did that? Because to not do that would not only have put them in opposition to Putin, it probably would have cost him his job and maybe who knows what more. In that setting in Russia today there is the Russian Orthodox Church. There may be pockets of resistance to the governmental authority, but by and large the head of the Russian Orthodox Church does the bidding of the government. Certainly in China, a godless society, a society that it does not even acknowledge God. The state definitely controls the church. Whatever expressions of Christianity there are in China today, if they have not been driven underground, which obviously many of them have, but the state approved churches stay in their lane because government controls the church.

You have the flip of that. The second way that you have that is you have the church controlling the state. This is kind of a theomony, almost a take-off of the theocracy of the Old Testament. We hear the idea of the church controlling government. It is a very popular thing today, increasingly so. I think dangerously so. I read just a week ago of the head of an evangelical seminary who was at odds with his board and they mutually agreed that he should resign. One of the reasons that he moved on was a separation of vision between the school and the president. One of the things that they named or mentioned was the fact that he was increasingly cozy with Christian nationalism. I believe Christian nationalism poses a very real threat to the church in America today. We have to be very careful that our understanding of this passage and of God's call upon our life as we think in terms of how we relate to government is in keeping with Scripture. God has not called the church in America to save America. God has called the church in America to bring the gospel to America. To the extent that we confuse our desire for political influence and political power in the shaping of our culture with the mission of the gospel, we put the mission of the church at great risk. We have seen this repeatedly over our history.

All of us want to live in a God honoring culture and society. But I take you back to the continuum at the very beginning. God's people have been faithful and will continue to be called to be faithful in whatever structure they find themselves living. My friends, if we could reform America so that the top five things that we're greatly concerned about – whether it is marriage, whether it is sexuality, whether it is the right to life, and all of those kinds of issues – if we could somehow amazingly shape all of government to agree with us, the same number of people would still be going to hell. The same number of people would still need to hear the gospel. The same number of people would still be waiting on the church to fulfill its great commission. When we think of the second one there are real dangers when the church is captured by the desire for political influence and power. I think our history, even our recent history, would suggest that the outcomes of that are not always very good. There are those instances where the church controls the state.

Then the third one, the state favors the church. The state favors the church, and the church just accommodates. It just goes along. We see that in history. We go back to

Constantine. Constantine came to power and instead of oppression and persecution on the church that had been patterned before him, he put his stamp of approval on Christianity and said Christianity will now be the state religion of Rome. Do you know what happened? The church became as corrupt as the state. That wasn't God's intention.

The last one I think is most reflective of Scripture. The church and state recognize each has authority. In other words, that truly is the separation of church and state. It's not the separation of church and state as it is largely understood today, which is the state saying get God out of everything. That's their understanding of the separation of church and state. We don't want God in anything. We don't want God in the public square. That's not of course the idea of that statement, but the church has been granted by God to commission to take the gospel to the world. God has raised up government for its purposes as well.

Let's look then at verse 1. As we do that, let me read it because we have two overriding principles here that are going to flow through all seven of these verses. Verse 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." There is the first overriding principle. The first overriding principle is that God is sovereign. God is sovereign. Many have observed this first verse. They've looked at this first verse and they said that this is as sweeping a statement as they could imagine the apostle Paul making. Robert Huldane in his commentary puts it this way: "It would be difficult if not impossible for anyone to write a more all-encompassing, absolute, utterly unqualified statement than what Paul makes in Romans 13." I need to read that again. It would be difficult if not impossible for anyone to write a more all-encompassing, absolute, utterly unqualified statement than what Paul makes in Romans 13:1. Everybody needs to hear Romans 13:1 to 7 because if we're a thinking Christian we have a question at the forefront of our minds and that question is rightly to be understood as what is my particular understanding of how I as a child of God living in the 21st century in our case in America, what is my responsibility to my government? What is it that God requires of me?

The answer is given to us in large measure in Romans 13. Peter's going to speak to this. Paul does again in Titus. But this is the most comprehensive section in all of Scripture dealing with this issue and he is going to say to us yes, God has something very specific in mind for you by way of your understanding of how you are to relate to government. God has something in mind that He has revealed to us. It's not up to us to decide what that is. That's what He says to us. Rome was as great an expression of power as has probably existed within human history with regard to government. Rome was powerful. Rome was self-aggrandizing. Rome was brutal. And here Paul writes to believers in Rome in the 1st century. The apostle Paul as we know was a citizen. He had the gift of citizenship. We saw that in the 12th chapter. He stepped into that. He exercised those privileges and those rights. In Philippi, the authorities beat him and Silas up and then they said let's just let these guys slip away quietly at night. We're done with them. Paul said no, you don't. I'm a Roman citizen. I have rights and privileges. The rights and privileges of a Roman citizen were significant.

But listen. The vast majority of people living in Rome in the 1st century were not Roman citizens. We know that upwards to 25 to 30 million maybe more of the people living under the influence of the Roman government were slaves. They had no rights at all. They had no privileges at all. That's probably the predominant group of people that was sitting in this congregation in the 1st century in Rome hearing these words that Paul wrote. People whose existence is that of being a slave. This is what Paul says to them. It would be easy at that point for a Christian to say I'm a Christ follower. I don't submit to anybody but Christ, and Paul will not countenance that attitude. He will not let that attitude stand. He will say that is truth, but it is not the full measure of truth. Christ is your Lord but there's something you're missing. Principle number one, as I said, God is sovereign. God is sovereign.

When you study the Scriptures, it is pretty apparent that God establishes for the benefit and welfare of humanity three basic institutions. The first coming in Genesis 1 and two being marriage and the family. God gets to define what that is. It was His idea. It was not a social construct. Marriage is between one man and one woman. God says this is the institution that I am creating and it is for the benefit of mankind. Then you get to Genesis 9 and God creates a second institution. That institution is human

government. Coming after the events of the Tower of Babel, God says this is what needs to happen and He instituted nation/states. We have the institution of human government. Then you go all the way to the New Testament and the work of Christ on the cross and the introduction of the New Covenant with the death and resurrection of Christ and the beginnings of the church. You have those three basic institutions for the benefit of mankind – marriage, family, government and the church. In each of those the principle is going to be the same. there is a governing authority and those under that governing authority are to understand their role in that governing authority.

God says secondly His sovereignty is absolute. His sovereignty is absolute. We wonder about that in Daniel chapter 2 and verse 21. Daniel says He changes times and seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He removes kings and He sets up kings. God is sovereign over government. He is sovereign over governors. He is sovereign over all. He is over both the state and over the individual. It is simply to say that God is sovereign and all authority comes from Him. That is the emphasis of Daniel's statement and that's what Paul is saying here. There is no authority except from God.

One of the most fascinating interchanges that we have in the life of Christ is in John 19. You remember Jesus is standing before Pilate. His very life hangs in the balance. Pilate is interrogating our Lord and our Lord is not cooperating. Finally Pilate says in exasperation: Do you not know who I am? I have the very power of your life in my hands. What did Jesus say? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know who I was standing before. Just ask me anything you want I will tell you. No, Jesus said to him you have no authority except that has been granted from above. Now that's the basis of what Paul is saying here. God's authority is absolute. There is no authority except from God.

Douglas Moo in his book on the book of Romans says behind every process is the hand of God. What I find fascinating at this point when Paul steps into this discussion, knowing the audience that he is writing to, not only in the 1st century but to us as well, he is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and says absolutely nothing about Caesar. Some people actually believe that Paul was under the understanding that this book could very well fall into the hands and be read by governmental authorities. He wanted to be very clear that he was not calling for an

insurrection. He was not calling for rebellion. In fact, it was just the opposite of that but he makes no mention of Caesar. He makes no mention of any political system. He doesn't make mention of any particular political problem. This is as wide, as broad, as expansive, as all-inclusive a statement that Paul could probably make, which causes us to understand that God is laying claim to being the ultimate authority over all other authorities, over every king, over every emperor, over every dictator, over every president, whatever and whoever it is. God is saying to us here that they are living under His authority and the authority that they have has been granted to them by Him.

That being said, we would say as well obeying the government is the general rule. Obeying the government is the general rule. Order is always to be honored over disorder. Anarchy is always a sign of rebellion. And you say: What about our own beginning as a nation? You'll have to come back another time for the answer to that. I think the point is this. We need to guard against a chip-on-our-shoulder attitude towards those in authority over us. Paul is establishing here the authority that God has granted to everyone who is in a position of leadership within government.

This brings us to the principle number two, which is submission to authority is commanded. Submission to authority is commanded. Just as God has established and instituted authority, so now He says in the second part 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. Again, what a remarkable precision, remarkable clarity. There isn't anything here that we struggle to understand. He says to us every person without exception, in every age without exception, under every government without exception is called to submit to those in authority over them.

As you look at the first verse when he says let every person, that's in the emphatic position. It is at the beginning of the verse so he's wanting to underscore that he is talking to all of us. There aren't any exceptions to this. This is for everybody. They are instituted by God. They are established by God. They are instruments and His divine providence is the way we would see that. We're under their authority and in being under their authority he says let every person be subject to. *Hupotasso*. A very familiar word in the New Testament. It is the idea of submission. Place yourself under and lift somebody else up is the idea. That's what He has called on us to do. It's not a

suggestion. It's an imperative. It's a command. It's in the middle voice which means we're to act on it ourselves. We're to do this.

Submission is, as I said, a common theme for the believer. Submission with regard to the institutions that God has created within government. Here it is. Within the home. Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, and then as well within the church. In every one of those instances, submission is called for in response to those in authority over us. What's the problem with that? The problem with that is we don't like to submit. The problem with that is none of us really enjoy submitting to those in authority over us. It is just a natural bent of our fallen nature to push against that. Here is this command. We don't like submitting and yet it's the very thing that God has called us to do in relation to human government. What we do like to do? What we do like to do is we like to go on social media. We like to join in the fun. We like to join in the cynicism and the ridicule and the mockery of our leaders. That we do enjoy. That we do regularly do.

Let me ask you. If Paul were here and we were having a little Q&A and somebody asked: Paul, what do you think about my going online occasionally and ridiculing and mocking and making jokes about government leaders, our president and others? What do you think about that Paul? I think he would say I've already given you your answer in verse 1. But if you missed it, look at verse 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. Paul makes it abundantly clear.

There are two other points on your outline. We're not going to get into those this morning, but just to flesh that out and show you what that looks like, this is for our good. We will develop this and get to this later in this passage. This matter of submission to those in authority is for our good. It's also to be understood that to go against civil authority is to go against the moral law of God. Again, you might say wait a minute! Are you saying that there are no exceptions to obeying the government? Are there any circumstances in which I say I can't do that? And I say you have to come back next week. That's verse two. We'll get into that next week, Lord willing. But the point of verse 1, the default position for the child of God, the default position for the believer in Christ is to find themselves in submission to the God ordained authority.

What do we take away? Let's never forget this. Never forget that our battle is not against flesh and blood. Our battles are against principalities and powers and darkness. That's what Paul makes so clear in Ephesians 6. It is so easy for us to miss what the real issue is. The real issue is not some human leader. It is a spiritual battle. Our battle as the church of Jesus Christ and as individual followers of Christ, our battle ultimately is not cultural, it's not ideological, it's not political. Our battle truly is to be understood as being a spiritual battle. Paul says in 2 Corinthians those that do not believe... and that's the world that we live in, my friends. Their eyes have been blinded to the glorious truth of the gospel. They're living out the only thing they know. We shouldn't be surprised at that. But what we should be compelled to do is, constrained by the love of Christ and the understanding of how the gospel has changed our lives, we should be living out the Lordship of Christ before a dying world and putting on full display the beauty and glory of the gospel and of the resurrected Christ in our lives. That is far, far more powerful than anything that we can think of to do in the light of our current circumstance, which at times seems to be getting bleaker every day. But I remind myself as I remind you, I live under the authority of the word of God. I live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. He has called me to live out this life no matter what's happening in the world in which I find myself. It is this gospel alone that is the power of God unto salvation.

Let's pray. Father God, we pray for the church this morning. We pray for our church, Father. We pray that we would confess and repent for the times that we have pursued so many things other than the Great Commission that You have charged us with. We have pursued the influence and power of our world at the expense of the gospel. I pray, Father, that as Your Spirit speaks into our lives in these coming weeks, we would more clearly align ourselves with the mission that You've given to this church and to every church that names the name of Christ, that we will be all about this gospel. This gospel that reminds us that Jesus lived His life for us. He died for us. He was raised again to give to us new life. What You have said to us is if we will believe that what Jesus did was enough, our sins will be forgiven. You will give to us the gift of eternal life. we pray to that end this morning, Father, if anyone who is listening will respond to this truth of the gospel and believe that what Jesus did is enough. We ask these things in Christ's name, amen.

