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Romans Road to Recovery / Romans 13:1-7

Because God establishes human government to restrain evil during this present age, the believer is duty-bound to submit to legal authorities as an act of obedience to God Himself.

Notes

Section: Faith to Faith (Changing Faith) — Section Two: What God's People Are to Do Outside the Church

7/5/2026 — Romans 13:1-7

Title: "Submitting to the Sovereign's Sword"

Subtitle: Recognizing the Divine Institution of Civil Authority in a Fallen World

Main Idea: Because God establishes human government to restrain evil during this present age, the believer is duty-bound to submit to legal authorities as an act of obedience to God Himself.

Companion Scripture: 1 Peter 2:13-17

Text: Romans 13:1-7

Introduction: The July 5th Tension

Yesterday, the skies over South Jersey were lit up with fireworks. Many grilled hotdogs, wore red, white, and blue, and celebrated a rebellion.

Independence Day is, quite literally, the celebration of throwing off authority. It is baked deeply into our nation's cultural DNA to prize our rights, to question our leaders, and to fiercely protect our personal freedoms. We are Americans, and our origin story is a tax revolt against a distant tyrannical king.

But yesterday was July 4th. Today is July 5th. And today, the Apostle Paul is going to lock us into a very different reality.

For the last several weeks on our ***Romans Road to Recovery***, the fountainhead of everything we have studied has been Romans 12:1-2: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."*

We love the idea of a transformed mind. But we tend to think of that transformation purely in terms of our private morality, our personal devotions, or how we treat each other *inside* the four walls of this church. From Romans 12:3 to the end of that chapter, Paul began to describe what that transformed mind looks like in practical terms. Those verses were focused on what it looks like inside the church. Now, Romans 13 speaks to what a transformed mind looks like *outside* the church. It is the living sacrifice applied to your citizenship. It is your theology walking down the street, engaging with the

public square, and interacting with the local zoning board in Glassboro.

Right now, the "spirit of the age"—the pattern of this world—is political outrage, rebellion, vitriol, and a fierce, unyielding demand for our own way. We are surrounded by a culture that believes the highest civic virtue is endless outrage. It seeks to weaponize this outrage and strives to educate and mentor us into doing the same. But Paul says, if your mind has actually been renewed, you will look completely different from the world around you.

The question we must ask ourselves is, "Do we look different?"

Look at verse 1. Here is what non-conformity to the world actually looks like on a Tuesday morning: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.*"

We love to talk about our rights, our liberty. But Romans 13 establishes the firm, unmovable boundaries of our freedom.

Yes, the Christian is a citizen of heaven. Yes, Jesus Christ is our ultimate King. But for the time being, **God has** placed us in earthly nations, and **He has** issued a strict **command** regarding how we are to interact with the state.

We don't submit because we are caving to the world; we submit because our minds have been transformed by God.

Because God sovereignly establishes civil government to restrain evil in a fallen world, our submission to earthly authority is actually an act of obedience to God Himself.

But, how do we do that?

Especially in a political climate as toxic, divided, and exhausting as ours?

Paul simplifies our perceived dilemma when he gives us the roadmap. He does it by subverting everything the ancient Roman culture—and our modern American culture—assumes about power.

We love to talk about our rights. But Romans 13 establishes the firm, unmovable boundaries of our freedom...

We don't submit because we are caving to the world; we submit because our minds have been transformed by God.

Now, I know exactly what some of you are thinking. I just talked about July 4th, and now I'm telling you rebellion is a sin. You are sitting there asking, "*Wait a minute. Was then 1776 a sin? Was the American Revolution a violation of the Bible?*"

Hold that thought. I promise you, we are going to answer that exact question before we leave here today. But to understand the exception, you first have to understand the rule. And Paul gives us the rule by subverting everything the world assumes about

power.

Think back to what we established just a few weeks ago in Romans 12:3-8. The world looks at power as a trophy to be paraded or a weapon to dominate others. But we learned that the power God has given *us*—the spiritual gifts distributed to the Church—are not trophies for personal display. They are functional tools for the Master's use. God has empowered the Church to serve, to show mercy, to practice hospitality, and to build up the body.

He did *not* empower the Church to rule the geopolitical world. He did not give us the power to conquer the state. That is a entirely different kind of power. He gave us the power of doing good in order to wage war against evil.

So, if the Church is holding the tools of service, who is holding the reins of civil authority? Paul answers that question right here, and it begins with recognizing exactly who is sitting on the throne.

I. Recognize the True Sovereign Behind the Earthly Seat (vv. 1-2)

Listen to the full logic of 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."

A plain reading of this verse sounds almost too simple, yet isn't that how God operates toward us?

If you are weary, come to Him and find rest. If you see your state in sin, simply accept His saving grace. Don't be conformed, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Since you have accepted His grace, be renewed by God's Word and prayer.

It all seems so simple, doesn't it?

Here in these verses, Paul wanted to remove the complication, the confusion as it were, from the minds of the Romans who were absolutely ruled by a tyrannic empire. We see in these verses that the insertion of God into any of life's circumstances is not one that complicates things more. **Inserting God into any of life's circumstances is instead, a simplifying act.**

Every world government that has ever existed is not a **necessary evil** invented by man.

These verses, instead tell us that...

Every world government is a divine institution designed by God.

But the moment you hear that government is a divine institution, the immediate

pushback is always the same: *Have you seen the news? Have you seen the corruption? God couldn't possibly have appointed that person.*

That is why, if we are going to obey this text without losing our minds or compromising our convictions, we have to make a critical distinction. We must...

A. Separate the Divine Institution from the Flawed Politician

Notice carefully what Paul does *not* say. He does not say, "Submit to the authorities, as long as they are Christians." He does not say, "Submit to the authorities, as long as you voted for them, or agree with their economic policies, or respect their moral character."

What he does say is hard, but it is not complicated.

Note the historical air Paul is breathing here. He is writing this letter to the church in Rome around AD 57. The man sitting on the throne in Rome, possessing absolute, autocratic power, is Nero. Talk about a tyrant! This is a pagan, bisexual, tyrannical ruler who would, just a few years after this letter was written, would begin blaming Christians for the burning of Rome. He would order believers to be dipped in pitch and set on fire to illuminate his garden parties.

Furthermore, this congregation had a very recent, very bitter history with the government. Just eight years before Paul wrote this, the previous Emperor, Claudius, issued an edict expelling all Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome. Imagine that for a moment. The state knocked on their doors, confiscated their property, stripped them of their livelihoods, and marched them out of the city. They were refugees. At the time Paul is now writing this, they had only recently been allowed to return home.

If any congregation had the right to harbor deep, visceral anti-government resentment, it was the church in Rome. And yet, writing to this traumatized people, living under the shadow of Nero's regime, Paul says,

"Submit."

Why?

Because

We must separate the divine institution from the flawed politician.

God established the *office* of government all the way back in Genesis 9, right after the flood. God knew that a world populated by totally depraved sinners would destroy itself without a mechanism for order. That might be humanity's flaw that led up to the flood in the first place, no established ruling body, so man did whatever was right in his own eyes, Genesis tells us.

The Greek word Paul uses here for "instituted by God" (*tetagmenai*) is a perfect passive participle. That means God is the one who did the acting, and it was an action

completed in the past with ongoing, continuing results today. God set up the hierarchy.

You are not commanded to endorse a politician's morality.

You are commanded to respect the office because God designed the order.

The word Paul uses for "subject" is *hypotassō*. It's a military term that means to willingly arrange yourself under the command of a leader. It implies a posture of respect toward an established order.

Our submission is not blind obedience to a man; it is a willing, respectful posture toward the structure God put in place.

And once we grasp that God is the architect of that civil structure, it completely changes the stakes of our obedience. We are no longer just talking about our civic duty; we are talking about our relationship with the Almighty. Because if God is the one who established the institution, then who exactly are you fighting when you refuse to submit to it?

B. Realize that Political Rebellion is Theological Rebellion (v. 2)

Romans 13:2 "2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves."

Because God is the one who put it in place, Paul drops the hammer in verse 2:

"Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."

When you actively resist the basic structure of civil law, you aren't just defying a mayor, a governor, or a president. You are defying the God who arranged the hierarchy.

In the first century, there was a radical movement called the Zealots. Their theology was simple: God alone is King; therefore, submitting to Rome is treason against Yahweh. It sounded very spiritual. It sounded patriotic. But Paul is crushing that theology right here. He is telling them, you cannot use your spiritual freedom as a cloak for civil rebellion.

There is no room here for polite, hypocritical Christianity. We cannot sit in our small groups, open our Bibles, and piously claim to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and then walk outside and act like sovereign citizens or anarchists in our communities. If you rebel against the authority God installed, you are rebelling against God.

Until the state crosses a very specific, biblical line, your political compliance is a **theological mandate**.

II. Respect the Restraint God Placed on a Fallen World (vv. 3-4)

Romans 13:3 "3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do

you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;"

This raises a massive theological question. If God is perfectly Sovereign, and if Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, why did He set up earthly governments run by sinful men?

It is because we live in a fallen world.

If you want to understand politics, you must start with the doctrine of total depravity. Human beings are born sinful, selfish, and violent. Without a leash, human depravity will destroy society. This describes many savage people groups that have existed throughout history, some of which still exist today. In fact, without God's created restraint, we all become savage. That is where sin always takes us, to savage ideology and practices. Just look at what anarchy-type rebellion in our present culture looks like today. They increasingly become savage in their response to the boundaries that God has commissioned. That is the wrong way to respond. Anarchy is never the Godly response or answer to an evil government.

We must respect the restraint God placed on a fallen world. Government is God's common grace to a fallen world to keep us from destroying ourselves.

A. See the Civil Magistrate as God's Unwitting Servant (v. 4a)

Look at verse 3 and the first half of verse 4: *"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, for he is God's servant for your good."*

That word "servant" is staggering. In the original Greek, the word is *diakonos*. It is the exact same word we use for "deacon" in the local church! Paul is applying a deeply theological, ecclesiastical term to the secular, pagan Roman magistrate.

He is telling these Roman believers:

That pagan magistrate down the street? The one who worships Jupiter and bows to the Imperial Cult? He doesn't know it, but he is God's deacon. He is a middle-management employee appointed by the true God to do a specific job. He is a tool in the Master's hand to maintain public order so that society doesn't devolve into the chaos we see in the book of Genesis or in Judges, where every man does what is right in his own eyes.

That is an absolute shift in our perspective. That keeps us on that path that is laid before us, looking unto Jesus, having the same mind as He. That enables us to...

B. Leave the Sword of Vengeance to the State (v. 4b)

But this particular deacon doesn't carry a communion tray on Sunday mornings; he

carries a weapon.

Verse 4 continues: *"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."*

This is a critical dispensational pivot. At the end of chapter 12, Paul commanded the church: *"Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God."*

The Romans must have read that and wondered, *If we don't fight back, how is justice served? Do murderers and thieves just get away with it? Are we just supposed to be passive doormats while evil runs rampant? What about the ones who abuse their power for personal gain and oppress the people in the process?*

Here is the answer: God delegated the "sword" (*machaira*) of **temporal** justice to the state.

Under the Old Covenant, the nation of Israel was a theocracy. Civil law, ceremonial law, and moral law were entirely fused together. The religious leaders possessed civil authority to execute people for crimes.

But in the Church Age, God has separated these domains.

During this present age, God has armed the Church with the Gospel to save souls, and He has armed the State with the Sword to restrain evil. The "sword" represents the state's police power and its right to exact punishment, including capital punishment, for extreme evil.

Listen carefully:

We do not try to build a Christian theocracy today.

The Church is not called to conquer the state, nor is the state permitted to govern the Church.

The Church does not execute heretics, and the State does not direct the church's spiritual duty, to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry, to go...to baptize...to make disciples...to teach all things.

We do not try to execute civil justice ourselves. We leave the sword in the hands of the government God appointed, freeing the church to focus entirely on radical mercy, active hospitality, and preaching the cross of Christ.

Instead...

III. Anchor Our Obedience in Conscience, Not Just Consequence (v. 5)

Because we know *why* the government exists, our motivation for obeying the law is fundamentally different from the world's motivation. If we want our nation to be great, it is to be only for God's glory. We don't want to fall into Nebuchadnezzar's trap in the book of Daniel, "Look at what all I have done."

Our obedience to government that rules over us is a matter of conscience, not just consequence.

We must...

A. Shift Our Motive from Fear to Worship

Paul writes in verse 5: *"Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience."*

Think about how an unbeliever interacts with the law. Why does an unbeliever obey the speed limit on Route 55? Likely, only because he sees a state trooper sitting in the median and he doesn't want to pay a \$200 ticket. He is avoiding wrath. The moment the trooper is out of sight, his foot often hits the floorboard.

A Christian should obey the speed limit because their conscience (*syneidēsis*) tells them that God honors an orderly society.

Our submission is an act of worship.

When you pay your vehicle registration fees on time, when you pull the proper permits to build that deck or replace that shed on your property, when you follow local zoning laws here in town—you are not just bowing to municipal code; you are honoring the God of order. You are recognizing that God is the author of structure.

B. Let Our Citizenship Be a Witness

At this point we must apply the analogy of faith here. We allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Does Romans 13 mean we blindly obey the government no matter what they tell us to do?

Does it excuse the horrors of Nazi Germany or other evil, totalitarian regimes?

Absolutely not.

Submission is the general rule, but disobedience is biblically required when the state steps out of its God-ordained jurisdiction.

There are two clear lines in Scripture:

First, when the state forbids what God commands, we disobey the state.

This is the intent of the First Amendment which reads:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

The phrase "wall of separation between church and state" was coined by Thomas Jefferson in an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists to explain his understanding of the First Amendment.

In 1947, the U.S. Supreme Court (in *Everson v. Board of Education*) formally adopted Jefferson's metaphor, ruling that the First Amendment intended to erect a "high and impregnable" wall of separation between the government and religion.

Additionally, **Article VI, Clause 3** of the Constitution supports this separation by stating that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

This separation of church and state has nothing to do with the absence of God in or the removal of God from the state.

The Separation of church and state:

- The State does not rule over the Church.
- The Church does not rule over the State.
- God rules over both.

Instead, the separation of church and state is the absence of the state's control over the church.

Article VI, Clause 3 clarifies at the same time, that the church also does not rule over the state.

Paul reminded us here that God rules over both. This is, many times, what many states either forget or never truly understood.

Think about Babylon. Daniel was a flawless, high-ranking government official. But when King Darius signed a law forbidding prayer to anyone but the King, Daniel went to his house, opened his windows toward Jerusalem, and prayed to God anyway.

When the Jewish council told Peter and John to stop preaching the name of Jesus, they didn't consult Romans 13 and surrender. They replied in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men." Then they prayed that the Lord would make them even more bold to speak the Gospel.

These examples teach us that **First, when the state forbids what God commands, should we disobey the state.**

Second, when the state commands what God forbids, we disobey the state.

When King Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to bow down and worship a golden statue In Daniel 3, they respectfully but firmly refused, and they were thrown into the fire.

But notice *how* they disobeyed. **They engaged in respectful defiance.** They didn't start a riot. They didn't try to overthrow Babylon. They simply said, "O King, we will not bow to your idol, and if you must throw us in the fire, our God can save us. But even if He doesn't, we still won't bow."

They disobeyed the unjust law, and then they submitted to the punishment.

Remember that question I asked you to hold onto at the beginning of the message? You know, the elephant in the room this morning. I opened this message talking about the 4th of July. You might be sitting there asking, "*Wait, Pastor, if rebellion is a sin, and Shadrach didn't try to overthrow Babylon, was the American Revolution a violation of Romans 13? Was 1776 a sin?*"

Historically, the men who founded this nation—many of whom were deeply theological and unafraid to confront evil with the Word of God—wrestled with this exact text.

The question **was not** whether they should confront the evil of the government that was oppressing the people, but **how** they should confront it.

They appealed to what Protestant theologians call the "Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate." They argued that 1776 was not a chaotic mob of individuals deciding to overthrow the government. Rather, it was lower, God-ordained authorities—the colonial legislatures, mayors, and governors—stepping in to protect the citizens from a higher authority—the King—who had abandoned his God-given duty and become a tyrant. It was one level of Romans 13 government holding another level of Romans 13 accountable.

But hear this clearly: We are not colonial legislatures in 1776. We are citizens of New Jersey in 2026 and of the United States of America.

Romans 13 is not a textbook on how to form a republic; it is a command for how the individual believer is to conduct their daily life.

We submit to the state *because* it is an authority established by God.

But when the state contradicts the God who established it, it loses its delegated authority **in that matter**.

We submit right up until the state demands that we sin, and then we gladly suffer the consequences for obeying the Higher King.

- When it comes to civil disobedience, Paul gives believers one option.

IV. Prove Your Faith Through Practical Compliance (vv. 6-7)

Finally, Paul brings this lofty, sweeping theology right down to our wallets and our mouths.

Theology that doesn't affect our bank accounts and our attitudes and our actions is not real theology.

So we are to first...

A. Subvert Cultural Outrage by Gladly Paying Your Dues (v. 6)

Look at verse 6: *"For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing."*

The Roman historian Tacitus records that right around the exact time Paul wrote this letter, there were massive public protests in Rome over the severe burden of indirect taxes. And locally, those Jewish Zealots were actively teaching that paying taxes to Rome was a betrayal of God.

The cultural pressure to join the tax revolt was immense. But Paul completely subverts that outrage. He looks at this traumatized, heavily taxed congregation and says:

"Pay them"

The government requires funding to do the job God assigned it.

Yes, the Roman government was corrupt.

Yes, some of those tax dollars went to fund pagan temples and the luxurious lifestyles of wicked emperors.

Paul knew that, and Jesus knew that when He held up a coin with a pagan inscription and said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

Refuse to let financial greed disguise itself as political protest.

We pay our taxes not because the government uses every dime righteously, but because we trust God's sovereign design for societal order.

Pay it being reminded that, "In God We Trust."

B. Render the Respect that the Office Demands (v. 7)

Then Paul closes the argument in verse 7: *"Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect ("fear" without contempt) to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."*

Paul is demanding total compliance. You give the state its money (taxes and revenue), you acknowledge its power to punish (*phobos*), and you treat its offices with the dignity that God's institution demands (*timē*).

You may not respect the man or woman holding the office. You may vigorously, fundamentally disagree with their political platform. But you owe "honor to whom honor is owed" because the seat they occupy is by God's providence.

This is where it gets real in the digital age. If our minds have truly been transformed by Romans 12—if we are a people moving from *Faith to Faith*

—We must strip our speech of the vitriol, the mocking, the cruel memes, and the slander that the world casually hurls at political leaders.

You have a smartphone in your pocket that gives you instant access to the digital town square. And the world uses its words to tear down anyone on the other side of the political aisle. The world thinks that disrespecting a leader is a badge of courage. But we are not of this world. We replace the outrage of the world with the dignity becoming of a citizen of heaven.

How can we claim to hold the keys of the Kingdom, how can we claim to offer the gospel of radical grace to our neighbors, if our social media feeds are clogged with the same toxic, slanderous political rage as the rest of the world?

When you speak about the President, the Governor, the Mayor, or the local police officer, does your tone sound like a cable news pundit, or does it sound like a citizen of the Kingdom of God?

Your gifts, your graces, and your citizenship are tools for the Master's use, not trophies for your own pride.

We don't get to act like the world just because we are frustrated with the world.

Conclusion: True Christian Patriotism

As we step out of the July 4th weekend and back into our daily lives, I want to leave you with a transformed view of what it means to be a patriot.

For the world, patriotism is waving a flag, demanding your rights, or idolizing a political party. But for the believer whose mind has been renewed by Romans 12, true Christian patriotism is something entirely different.

True Christian patriotism is not fundamentally about honoring the humans and the institutions that rule over us for their own sake.

True patriotism is giving honor and glory to the Sovereign God who created the concept of government and placed those leaders in their seats.

When we pay our taxes without complaining, when we obey the laws of our townships, when we speak respectfully of leaders we completely disagree with—

We aren't bowing to a man or a government. We are bowing to God.

We are proving that our trust is not in the ballot box, but in the throne room of heaven.

Submit to the state. Pay what you owe. Honor the office. Pray for your leaders. And let your radical, peaceful compliance be the loudest proof to South Jersey that you are a citizen of a better country, eagerly awaiting the return of the true and final King.

Doing so is your act of obedience to God Himself.

Doing so is your reasonable act of worship.

Here are 6 challenges for you to do in light of Romans 13:1-7:

1. Elevate Your Patriotism: Stop idolizing political parties; start honoring the God who ordains the offices.

2. Pay Your Dues Gladly: Pay your taxes and civic fees not as a reluctant victim, but as a believer funding God's mechanism for public order.

3. Filter Your Speech: Strip your conversations and social media feeds of political vitriol and replace it with the dignity becoming of a citizen of heaven.

4. Obey the Law as Worship: Follow local ordinances and laws with a clear conscience, proving to the watching world that you trust a Higher Sovereign.

5. Pray for Your Leaders: Actively petition God for the men and women holding office,

regardless of whether you voted for them.

6. When you Defy, Defy with Respect: Submit completely to the state until it demands you disobey God—and when it does, disobey respectfully and accept the consequences.

After all, ultimately, isn't that what Jesus did for you?