

Obedience to Civil Authorities

Romans 13:1

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

This is a big moment because we start a new chapter in Romans, loved ones. It's Romans 13 and it really begins the subject of obedience to civil authorities. That's really what it is so you might want to look at it, it's Romans 13:1.

Romans 13:1, "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." I don't know if you know that there was once a time on the earth when there were no laws at all, did you know that?

There was a time away at the beginning of the world when God had just made Adam, you remember and Eve, his wife and He simply told them, "Look, live according to the life that flows into your mind and your spirit from your friendship with Me and your daily conversation with Me, and just live by that and do what that guides you to do." That's the way it was at the beginning.

There were no laws, no regulations. It was just up to Adam and Eve to do what they sensed they should do inside through the life that was flowing into them everyday from their conversation and their friendship with God who had made them. It's known as the period of freedom or the dispensation of freedom in the world or the dispensation of self-determination. It was a disaster, it was.

Adam and Eve and their children just ignored their conscience and each day when they got up, they failed utterly to acknowledge God. They just stopped acknowledging Him as their God and they started to live by their own ideas of what was good and what was evil. They began to live by their own knowledge of good and evil and the result, loved ones, was absolute chaos. You can see it described in Genesis 6, way at the beginning of the Bible, the result of every man doing what was right in his own eyes.

Genesis 6:5, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." and then in Genesis 6:11, "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth" and the chaos and anarchy was so complete that God had only one option and that's in Genesis 6:13.

Genesis 6:13, "And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.'" In other words, the chaos and the anarchy was so complete that the only thing God could do was to destroy the whole thing, to wipe all the human race out except for Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives, and so, that's what He did.

Then after about a year of flood, which covered the whole earth and the evidence of which is all around and the fossils that we're still discovering in the rock strata, after about a year of flood, then God started all over again from Noah and his three sons and his daughter, but this time loved ones, He instituted authority. He instituted order in nature.

In other words, He determined that He would separate the world of nature from human beings' attitude to Him. Before, you see they were connected mystically, and so when man rebelled against God, the whole world of nature went chaotic too. But now God separated the two and he instituted an order in nature that would enable Him to continue whatever the attitude of humanity to Him was. At the same time, He instituted an order in society, a civil order and authority that would ensure that the human society would continue whatever man's attitude to Him was.

You may know the verses that I am referring to there; they're in Genesis 8 when God started the race again. Genesis 8:22 refers to the order that He instituted in nature when He separated it from its mystical connection with us human beings.

Genesis 8:22, "He said, 'While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease'." So it was to be, so it will be to the end, irrespective of what we men or women think of God, irrespective of what our attitude to it is, the seasons are going to continue. God has instituted that order and authority in nature. But loved ones, He also instituted a civil order and authority in society and it's Genesis 9:6.

Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in His own image." That was the first law that God initiated and the beginning of His institution of civil and political and legal authority. Now it's important for you to see why it was instituted.

It wasn't instituted to redeem men's hearts and soul. It wasn't, loved ones. It was instituted to preserve order in the society, to keep the order that was necessary to prevent Him having to destroy the world all over again. That's why He instituted civil authority. He didn't institute legal and civil authority to save men's souls, that's concerned with God's redeeming grace where He changes men's hearts inside and makes them like His own, but this was the preserving grace of God.

The purpose of this was to preserve the order in the world so that He would not have to destroy the world again with a flood. And as long as civil authority and political authority and legal authority are maintained in our earth, God will not have to destroy the world again. But whenever they cease, He will destroy the world again but this time, by fire.

Now, that's the historical perspective behind this verse that we're studying this morning. That's why Paul says, "Let every soul", and maybe you'd look at it, it's Romans 13:1, "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." That's the seriousness of it.

It's not just kind of a nice little thing that we ought to do because we have had civics classes. It's a vital grace that God has built into the world for its preservation so that as many of us as possible will have as much time as He can possibly give to us to get to know Jesus and to receive His Spirit. That's the purpose of the institution of civil and legal authority.

It's interesting you know, the Greek is "pasa pseuche", it's "every soul". Let every soul be subject to the civil authorities, everybody, without any exception. And there's an old commentator John Gill who wrote really in the 19th century and he elaborates it this way, he says, "Every soul, that is every man, all the individuals of mankind, of whatsoever sex, age, state or condition, ecclesiastics not exempted, the Pope and his clergy are not exempted from civil jurisdiction, nor any of the true ministers of the Gospel. The priests under the law were under the civil government and so was Christ Himself and His apostles who paid tribute to Caesar."

Then he says, "Subjection to the civil magistrates means and includes all judges relative to them, such as showing them respect, honor and reverence suitable to their stations, speaking well of them and their administration, using them in candor, not bearing hard upon them for little matters and allowing for ignorance of the secret springs of many of their actions and conduct if known might greatly justify them; wishing well to them and praying constantly, earnestly and heartily for them, observing their laws and injunctions, obeying their lawful commands." It's strong.

Of course he says that the priest and the ministers, they have to submit to the civil authorities because they themselves are involved in a different ministry. The priests and ministers, and ourselves here are concerned with the deliverance of men's souls from the power of sin and their introduction into the kingdom of God. But the civil and political and legal authorities are not concerned with that. They're concerned with the preservation of society from the anarchy that sin brings.

In other words, they're concerned with the preservation of the kingdom of this world from chaos and anarchy. So they are two very different functions that we perform. The one is concerned, the church, with the expression of the redeeming grace of God, with delivering men and women out of the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of Christ, with the deliverance of men and women from the power of sin in their inward lives. But the civil and political authorities are concerned with the preservation of the kingdom of this world from being destroyed by the anarchy that sin brings.

In other words, they are concerned with the restraining of sin, with the holding back of sin. Otherwise loved ones, sin, unrestrained, would destroy us all in a moment. The nuclear bombs would be flying in all directions. The murderers would fill our cities. So the civil and legal authorities are there to restrain them and the spiritual authorities are there to deliver individuals from the power of sin.

Old Luther, you know, made this a cardinal point of his theology. He talks very clearly about two powers. He said there were two powers in the world. The power of the sword is wielded by legal, civil and political authorities and is expressing the preserving grace of God that holds society back from disillusion and keeps it from being destroyed by the power of sin and anarchy. Whereas the other power is the power of the Spirit. The power of the Spirit is there to express the redeeming grace of God, to touch men's hearts and to make them like His Son Jesus and to deliver them through the death of Jesus from the power of sin in their inward lives.

Then Old Luther, do you remember, who came out of the censor of the Catholic church, said, "Never confuse those two powers." Never confuse the power of the sword and the power of the Spirit because if the church, whether it's Protestant or Catholic, ever confuses those two powers, then it will make vain the existence of either power. He said, "The power of the sword must never be wielded by the Spiritual body of Christ and the power of the Spirit can never be wielded by the civil and legal authority of the state", and of course you and I know that so well.

We know that there is always danger when the power of the state encroaches upon our freedom to practice our religion. But do you see the other side? That the power of the Spirit is always in danger when it begins to encroach upon the state's freedom to practice non-religion. You always get into a very shady area when you try to use the power of the sword to save men's souls. It's not fitted for that and it will not bring it about. It will only bring resentment and rebellion about in people's hearts. So it's vital to keep the two separate.

Now, Jesus, you remember, pointed out the distinction of these two spheres very clearly if you like to look at it, it's a passage that we all quote. Matthew 22:21, "They said, 'Caesar's', then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's." Jesus implied that you should keep the two separate.

If the church ever uses the power of the sword to try to bring about its central mission of saving men's soul, then it'll find that it'll lose its own power. So that's one side. The church on the one side should keep clear of using the power of politics or civil authority. Now on the other side of course, Jesus said, "You've to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's". So as individual citizens, we are responsible for exercising our right to vote and indeed exercising our right to run for political office, if God guides us that way.

So, there are two extremes. On the one side, if the church ever as a special interest group, begins to try to perform its central mission of saving men's souls by using the power of the sword, it'll lose the power of the sword. And on the other side, if its members ever give up the responsibility to vote and to be good and responsible individual citizens in regard to public office, then they will cease to be in this world and cease to exercise the witness that God has for them.

It's interesting too to note the very words that God prompts Paul to use in this verse. Maybe you would just look at the verse and then I'll tell you what the Greek word is. It's in Romans 13:1, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." Paul is saying every person is responsible to religious authorities and every person has responsibility to civil authorities and the word for governing authorities is a word called "Exousias" and it's actually an abstract word.

It's an abstract word. It just means authorities in the abstract and it's interesting that Paul uses that. He doesn't get into particulars. It's as if he is going back to the times of Noah and reminding us that God had to institute authority as authority, in order to preserve the world from chaos. It's authority that counts.

He doesn't get into arguments about what kind of authority or whether the authority be Republican or whether it be Democratic, he just says, be subject to the governing authorities. Authority is necessary to preserve the world from chaos. Authority in itself needs to be respected and needs to be submitted to.

He doesn't get into arguments about the kind of authority. So it's as if he says, "Look, for fallen man to exist in this world, authority is needed and a government needs to have the power to enforce that authority. If that doesn't exist, the thing will blow apart in chaos and the only thing that God will be able to do is bring fire upon the earth and destroy the whole thing again."

So it's as if he says, "Authority in itself is something precious." He doesn't get into whether it's the authority of a king, doesn't get into whether it's authority of a president, doesn't talk about whether it's a Democratic authority or an oligarchic authority, he just says, "Authority itself is vital. You must be subject to authority. God has ordained that authority."

In other words, he says, "If you so play around with the idea of authority, even in order to make it more just and you so play around with it that you in effect destroy the very existence of authority, then you cast yourself into anarchy." So he says, "If you allow your schools to become jungles, in order to balance perfectly the rights of the children as against the authority of the teachers and

in so doing, you create jungles instead of schools," then he says, "You're casting yourself into anarchy. You're opening yourself up to the anti-Christ. You're throwing yourself into a position where God alone can come and wipe the whole thing out."

Or if you allow criminals and murderers to go unpunished on your streets, you're so intent on making the authority exactly just, so ensuring that the laws of evidence be absolutely right and that you make sure that the evidence has been collected correctly and that no offense has been committed against the individual and you're so preoccupied with that-- that the result is, you let criminals and murderers go free on your streets.

Then he says, "You're not seeing the big picture. You're failing to see the wood for the trees. It's authority that God has initiated and it's vital. And if in order to make that authority more what you want it to be or in your opinion, more just, you actually end up making authority of no value and destroying authority, then you oppose the whole principle of what God's telling you."

Loved ones, it's the same. He says that you backlog your courts. If you backlog your courts by this kind of tripping of each other up over laws of evidence or over choosing of juries and you backlog your courts to such an extent that the people have to go free because they can't be dealt with, then he says you're in effect, destroying authority. That's what's important about the abstract "non-Exousias", you see.

He doesn't get all mixed up in the details. He doesn't fail to see the wood for the trees. He says, "Look, stop, stop your details. Stop your splitting hairs. It's authority that counts. If in order to make the authority even more just, you end up actually destroying authority, then in effect, you're disobeying God."

So loved ones, you see some of the effects that that has in our own society and our own life. We're just to the beginning here of what I think will be a two month study of this subject of our responsibility to civil authorities. So, there'll be plenty of time for us to ask questions and you can ask me questions as we go through the weeks and you can pray that I'll have more light from the Holy Spirit, so that we'll be able to see what He wants us to understand.

So we'll have plenty of time to do that, but loved ones, at this very beginning stage, if we really claim, as many of us do, to be people of the Book, you know, people of this world, then it's very important for us not only to see what these writers write but to understand how they think. And you notice that they don't get into all kinds of details whether revolution is justified.

They don't get into all kinds of details of what we would do if we were living under communism, they don't. They take a very humble attitude. They say, "Look, I am not bright enough or clever enough to answer all the hypothetical and theoretical questions that you can think of in this world. All I can do is, tell you the principle that God has set forth here and then tell you that He will give you grace in your situation here in America to apply that to your situation. He will give grace to the Africans so that they will understand how it applies there. He will give grace to the people in Russia to know how it applies there." That's important because I think many of us get too big for our boots, we do.

I think we're just far too clever. We hear commands like this and we think, "Oh well, let's tackle all the theoretical and hypothetical questions that I can get my hands on," and of course in so doing, we do the same as we've done with authority in our society. We have attended everything but

what is necessary to attend to; that is, the situation in our own time or the situation in our own state.

So right at the beginning, I had urged you to do that. To not only notice what these inspired writers say, these are the inspired writers that God gave wisdom and insight to, but also see the way they think and they don't think with sophistry. They're not always looking for an argument. They feel these things are difficult enough, "Lord, show me how this applies to me in my situation", and loved ones there are some things nevertheless that we can come into now.

You might say, "Well, brother, don't you think that Paul treated this complex matter of civil authority in such an abstract way and in such a simplistic manner because actually he wasn't facing all kinds of illegally exercised authority. He wasn't facing all kinds of authority that is criminally exercised. He wasn't facing that kind of thing and that's why he was able to deal with this in such a simplistic way."

Loved ones, do you think this man had forgotten the most criminal exercise of authority that has ever taken place in our world? Especially when he actually was alive at that time? Maybe you'd look at it, dear ones. It's John 19:7.

John 19:7, "The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God.' When Pilate heard these words, he was the more afraid; he entered the praetorium again and said to Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, 'You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin'", and then in John 19:14.

John 19:14, "Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priest answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified." Do you think Paul forgot that?

Do you think when he said that all authority is instituted by God, that he forgot about that? You know he was a subtle philosophical and practical thinker and he had no trouble remembering that. When he said, "Let every soul be subject to the authorities because those civil authorities are instituted by God", he knew the kinds of criminal exercise of authority that had taken place in his day. No, even more than that. He knew it in his own life. If you look at Acts 7:59.

Acts 7:59, "And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting to his death. And on that day, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

Acts 9:1, "But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them down to Jerusalem." Do you think Paul had forgotten that, how he himself had criminally and cruelly exercised the authority that he had?

Loved ones, not only did Paul not forget it but in the last sentence of this verse in Romans 13,

maybe you'd look at it, he states clearly that he actually means the thing not only in an abstract sense, he means it in the concrete expressions that existed in his day.

Romans 13:1, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist...", and he wrote this in Rome, he wrote it to the Romans, "And those that exist have been instituted by God." Lenski is a Lutheran commentator and he translates it, "And the ones existing today exist as having been arranged by God", that's it.

So you know, there's not a whole lot of qualifications about whether the authority, the legal or the criminal, whether it be fair or whether it be just. There is this very strong command "Be submissive and subject yourselves to the civil authorities."

It's interesting, there were two old Rabbis really who lived years, years ago, hundreds of years ago and one of them was visiting the other who was very sick and Jose de Kizma was the sick one and he said to the other one, they were both experts in the law, and he said to him, "Anino, my brother my brother! Knowest thou not that this nation", meaning the Romans, "Knowest thou not that this nation has received an empire from God for it has laid waste to his house and has burnt his temple and has slain his saints and destroyed his good men and yet it endures."

So it really began you know, because it's hard to get, but it's the typical old clever Rabbi, "My brother my brother! Knowest thou not that this nation", Rome, "have received their empire from God", you don't know that they have received their empire from God, "For it has laid waste to his house, has burnt his temple and has slain his saints and destroyed his good men and yet it endures", so it must have been arranged by God.

Loved ones, that's it. It may have lots of problems for us but that's the position that scripture comes from. Of course we'll see later on when we begin to talk about Sunday next if there is any resistance that Christians can show to a civil authority. We'll begin to see that this kind of attitude is found in Jesus' own words, in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My kingdom is not of this world because if my kingdom were of this world, my disciples would fight."

Loved ones, there's some great truth here that God has for us, that sometimes we fight this political and civil battle and we get preoccupied with these civil authorities as if this was the only kingdom that we had and there is sometimes a frenetic, frantic attitude by many of us who call ourselves children of the kingdom of God. There is sometimes a frenetic attitude that almost suggests that we actually hope that the kingdom of God will be built here on earth when God has plainly told us that that will not be until the millennium.

There's something strong in the scriptural teaching that first, you've to be subject to the civil authorities. They'll begin to talk more about whether any resistance is possible, when those civil authorities are not legal or when they're criminal, but basically that's very strong teaching.

Loved ones, I would therefore ask all of us one important question in our society. Do we know anything about subjection and submission to civil authority? Do we? Or are we like C.S. Lewis' dog, do you remember? He says, he never really obeyed you, he sometimes agreed with you. And don't you feel it a bit? It's very obvious with pastors but that's not really what we're doing. But it's very obvious with pastors.

You submit as long as you agree with them and you go to another church and the tragedy is not that

that happens, the tragedy is we think that's right. We think that's right and we don't realize that we are authorities unto ourselves when we do that, because we throw away the authority that we don't agree with or that we don't like. We have no sense at all that this authority was arranged by God over us, no sense of that at all.

Could it be that we are a lost generation without roots? Could it be that we are a generation that have trouble with our self-identity because we have no concept of authority at all, but we think authority is the person that we happen to agree with at that time and we don't see that we are our own authority in that case, but let's tie it up politically.

We ask President Reagan to win his right to have authority over us every Saturday at every radio broadcast, every press conference, really, don't you? Unless he supports our party line, unless he measures up to our ideas of what a fair President should be, we ignore him.

In other words, is there not a great tendency of us in regard to our civil authorities to submit to them as long as we agree with them and as long as they win our faith? Is it not true that we have no sense, virtually no sense of responding, "Lord, thank You for the outcome of this election. Thank You Lord that You have seen what this country needs. Thank You Lord that even if it didn't go the way I wanted it to go, You have worked all things according to the counsel of Your will and now this is our President and this is our Congress and this is our Senate and we will respect them and love them and pray for them and submit to them and give every opportunity for them to hold back the ravages of sin and anarchy among us"?

I wonder, loved ones, are we in such trouble with our children because we're in trouble with ourselves? Maybe this is not right but I wonder is there something. I tell you it brings great stability to your heart, if you are able by faith to thank God for those who are in authority over you in your job and your business, to thank God for those who are in authority over you and your church, to thank God for those who're in authority over you in your government and to trust him to overrule anything that they might do that would spoil God's will for your life. That's a stable place to stand instead of out there moving into a new position every time according to whether you agree with the guy or not.

Loved ones, there is a place to stand in this world that is firm and solid and it is under the banner of this verse, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities, for they are instituted by God and those that exist, have been ordained by Him." I really pray that the Holy Spirit will deal specially with us all.

I know the thousands of tricky little questions you have in your mind but above all that, He'll deal with our hearts and bring us to see that what we're talking finally is a heart matter. The matter is not the details, the matter is not the sophistries, the matter is the heart. Have we a heart that is submissive to any authority, especially the one that God has ordained? Let us pray.

Dear Father, we ask forgiveness that so often we have felt that You weren't in control. Forgive us our Father that we've been so governed by sight and not by faith, that we have grown frantic in regard to our bosses, in regard to our pastors, in regard to our Presidents and our senators, and Lord we have thrown away faith and instead taken up worry and anxiety and then been driven to the weapons that this world uses to bring stability. Father forgive us.

Lord, we do respect your word and we would take it into our own hearts this morning, "Let every soul

be subject to the governing authorities for those authorities are instituted by God and those that exist today, exist by His election." Lord, we want to thank you for President Reagan, we want to thank you for this government. We want to thank you, Lord, for the bosses that we have at work, we want to thank you Lord for the pastors and the elders that are over us in your body.

Father, we want to set an example to our children of respectful authority, and then Lord, we want to put the whole responsibility into your hands of governing those authorities so that we ourselves will be able to fulfill your will for us. Lord, we thank you that the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. We thank you Father that you're saying to us, "Obey my word, submit to the authority, I'll take care of the authority." Lord we thank you. Thank you for plain, wholesome, confident places for us to stand in faith.

Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.