

Sermon Draft

Text: Romans 13:1–7

Sermon: Independence Day 2022 (The Authority)

Our text is plain and straightforward. As we consider it, let's also consider a time 456 years ago. A new document sat awaiting some of the most prominent men in North America. The craftsmanship of Thomas Jefferson had largely withstood the numerous suggestions and complaints of the Continental Congress. All it needed was John Hancock's "John Hancock" and the signatures of the other delegates. Imagine yourself in line, ready to grasp quill pen and make your mark. What thoughts are in your mind? Do you think of the fighting that started over a year ago? Do you worry about pledging your life and your possessions plus your "sacred honor" to the cause of independence from Great Britain? Are you excited? afraid? uncertain? Hold those thoughts. The line is long, people are moving slowly, and you have time to wait. While waiting, return, if you will, to today's text.

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (v 1). This sounds simple enough. You’re a person; I’m a person. Next, governing authorities. Even if we live outside any city limits, we don’t live outside the rule of any number of these authorities. Here in these United States, we have mayors and city councils, township officials, county or parish administrators, governors and state legislatures, a president and a congress. Add to this the judiciary, from city judges to the chief justice of the Supreme Court. We haven’t even gotten to the various appointed bureaucrats, nor the assorted law-enforcement officers, constables, FBI agents, and all in-between.

Through Paul, the Holy Spirit reminds us that the offices these men and women hold have been instituted by God. Because God does not govern the world face-to-face—since that would destroy all of us sinful people—he established what we call his “*left-hand rule*,” his “*kingdom of the left*.” He waves his wrathful sword in the face of those who consider criminal activities, often scaring them into compliance (even if they don’t agree or wish to cooperate). Others, more bold or more foolish, challenge this rule. They rob; they assault; they threaten and intimidate; they destroy property; sometimes they even kill. For them, God’s sword is more than a threat. He authorizes (gives authority to) ordinary people to take extraordinary means. These governing authorities are to forcefully use God’s sword. Even the taking of another’s life is condoned, so long as it is justly done in the carrying out of this office.

This is what Paul means when he says, ***“Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves”*** (v 2). It’s not only the high-profile courtroom dramas where murderers and mass-murderers hear their fate. It’s the little everyday things. The eight-sided sign reads “STOP.” If you don’t stop, don’t complain about the police officer writing the ticket. The rectangular sign beside the highway may read 55, 60, or 70. However, if your speedometer reads faster than the sign, don’t complain about the police officer writing the ticket.

While we sit beside the road, angry or embarrassed, others blissfully drive past. They aren’t worried about being the next person pulled over because they’re not speeding. They came to a complete stop. They used their turn signal, didn’t block the passing lane, or otherwise kept a law that we broke. They aren’t afraid because ***“Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong”*** (v 3). And in these seemingly minor points, just as much as protecting us from thieves, murderers, or terrorists, each of our divinely instituted governing authorities ***“is God’s servant to do you good”*** (v 4).

So, as we receive our justly deserved ticket for coasting through the stop sign, maybe, either in fear of God or “*because of conscience*” (v 5), we imagine if the intersection hadn’t been empty. Instead, a van of Little Leaguers, a couple of young girls on bicycles, or an ambulance were there. The authority of our government wanted to make that intersection safe for these and all others.

If we all did as we pleased, the chaos would be unimaginable. Either we would cower in our homes, slipping out only when necessary, or we would be out in oversize vehicles, speeding past, cutting off, or crashing through others. God’s servants for our good don’t want this to happen any more than we do.

Granted, there are times when government decisions seem ludicrous, even sinful. Strange projects are funded with taxes you’ve paid. Wars against people who never bothered you drain tax coffers you filled. Laws authorize or allow behavior that we think or know is sinful. In portions of our nation people can legally indulge in perverse sexual fantasies. They can gamble themselves into debt and poverty. By federal court decisions they can even end the lives of unborn children in every state of the union.

Yet if the government does not compel us to sin, then ***“it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience”*** (v 5). Remember that Paul was looking at a pagan, idolatrous Roman government as his example of authority. Already, some areas faced officially sanctioned persecution of Christians. However, Paul would appeal to this pagan government and its Caesar. He wouldn't attempt a jailbreak, even if unjustly held for more than a year. Finally, according to early church sources, he would bare his neck to the executioner's sword for the crimes of believing in Christ and spreading his Gospel.

Paul wasn't the only one. The martyrs' lists from the church's first few centuries show person after person who accepted arrest and conviction. They allowed sinful officials to exercise authority even when it meant death. They answered the summons to the stake, the cross, or the arena floor.

Finally, among them all, Old and New Testament martyrs alike, stood the One Martyr Supreme to whom they all pointed, Jesus Christ. To this Jesus, the Father gave “*all authority.*” Yet according to his human nature, as a subject of Rome and as an Israelite, Jesus submitted to the authorities. He bore witness of obedience—*martyr* means “witness”—witness of obedience to the Father and to divinely ordered authority.

Christ's perfect obedience, while an example for us, more importantly brings forgiveness for our imperfect, unwilling submission. He was charged the synagogue tax in Capernaum (Matthew 17:24–27), which he paid (albeit through the miraculous finding of the coin in the fish). He submitted to the whole Law—moral, ceremonial, and civil—that he himself handed down on Sinai. He loved God with all his heart, mind, and soul. He loved his neighbor as himself. He allowed the authorities to arrest him. He endured the trial of the Jewish council, even if it was held in violation of its own laws. He humbled himself before Pilate, yet also reminded Pilate that even Rome only ruled by divine permission: ***“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin”*** (John 19:11).

Satan gave Jesus ample opportunity to rebel against the authorities. Imagine him whispering in Jesus' ear, "You're in charge. You have the real authority. Show them who rules!" And that's exactly what Jesus did. He showed all who have eyes to see and ears to hear that his Father ruled. Jesus submitted perfectly to his Father's will, obeying both direct divine command and the will of God exercised through human authority. In so doing, he who was tempted as we are but yet remained "*without sin*" is able to "*sympathize with our weaknesses*" (Hebrews 4:15). He also paid for our weak, sinful disregard of authority.

From all eternity, the Son pledged unending allegiance to the Father. This unswerving loyalty Jesus then displayed also as a man, honoring earthly authority and obeying its laws. This perfect citizen of heaven and earth now confers citizenship rights on us. In Baptism, we have immigrated from the principality of Satan to the kingdom of Christ. As Christ taught his family and his followers, so he teaches us: The Father reigns supreme through his beloved Son.

“All authority in heaven and on earth” belongs to Jesus (Matthew 28:18). All creation—believing or not, living or inanimate—is subject to his rule in the kingdom of power. Yet because we are forgiven through the blood of his Son, God blesses us also with citizenship in the kingdom of grace. While the intimidation of divine Law still terrifies us in our sin, the Gospel lovingly draws us closer to our Savior. This forgiveness of sins leads Christians into willing submission to the rule and will of Christ because we know that his rule is perfect and always for our good. He is the King who gave his life for his people. We also willingly *“submit . . . to the governing authorities”* (v 1), because this is right and because we know that it is for our good. We can in good conscience pledge allegiance to our nation’s flag and all it represents because we are loyal to the One who rules all nations.

As we circle back to our original consideration, God leads us to an interesting (and, perhaps, uncomfortable) comparison: In a situation almost the reverse of the American Revolution, Jesus came to restore a divine monarchy. He came not only to crush the serpent’s head, but also to crush the rebellion into which the devil led humankind. His goal was to bring the rebels to surrender or to drive them to flight.

But look, the line has shortened. It's almost your turn. And whether or not to sign this Declaration of Independence is suddenly not as easy a decision as you thought. Are you able to declare in good conscience that the proposed new "governing authorities" have a rule that's been "instituted by God"? Have you perhaps determined that the British government has already forfeited its divine right through neglect and that you're merely ratifying a previous decision? Or, if you sign, might you be violating God's clear message: ***"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities"*** (v 1). Finally, it comes to you. Weighing the Word of God, carefully considering his commands and his promises, you make a decision not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. What is that decision? No one can tell you. You have been freed by Christ to be a responsible citizen of his earthly and heavenly kingdoms. You know the best decision, and you know that he will empower you to live—even to die—by it. For whatever government you have, no matter how free or oppressed you seem to be, you know that in Christ you are free indeed. Free to live, to love, to serve God, neighbor, and government.

If your choice is made not in spite or in willful disobedience to his Word, then God will either honor it as correct or will forgive a sin done in unwilling ignorance. Christ's obedience both to the governing authorities and to his Father guarantees both. We don't have to stand there, paralyzed, wondering whether to drop the pen or dip it into the inkwell. Our freedom of choice, coupled with obedience and responsibility to God, goes beyond anything even this great land can offer or guarantee. God's freedom doesn't remove government shackles. Rather, God's freedom allows absolute freedom to be Christian under earthly Government.

For God is a God of order, not chaos, and he continues imposing his rule on all creation. His rule will continue through government as well as church and Scripture until Christ returns to unite all his "patriots"—we who love our true, eternal Fatherland—into his eternal kingdom of glory, while forever banishing the rebels to the fate they brought on themselves.

God grant you the wisdom to follow just rule and reject the sinful, the ability to pray for those in authority and to thank him daily for the benefits of stable government, and the desire to use the freedom you now have—as a citizen of the United States and especially as a Christian—to live out your life in honor of Christ and in service of your neighbor. Likewise, the Lord give you courage to use this freedom to proclaim boldly Christ’s rule over all and his forgiveness won for all.

Amen