DATE: **October 17, 2026**
SERIES: **The Gospel Is**
MESSAGE: **Putting On Christ**
PASSAGE: **Romans 13**
SPEAKER: **Ryan Harmon**

So, as we begin this evening, I'm going to do something maybe a little dangerous, maybe something that I will come to regret, we'll see. I have a reason for doing it. My hope is that in asking you the question that I'm about to ask you, we will hear Paul's words in a very personal way. That's my hope. I want to help us feel the weight of his words.

So here's what I want you to consider to yourself in your mind. I want you to think right now of a political leade—national, local, doesn't matter—a political leader that you really struggle to respect. One, you just don't care for very much. Don't say it out loud. Now, here's how Paul begins Romans 13. He says, "Everyone must submit to governing authorities."

Now, when it comes to the realm of politics and government—let's call it our political lives—many of us have very strong opinions. It's an area of a very intense passion. And because of that, when we get to Romans 13 verses 1 to 7, our temptation is just to breeze quickly past what he has to say. But that's not what we want to do.

As people who want to embrace the power of gospel, as Caleb just talked to us about, as people who are willing to offer up our bodies as living sacrifices, who no longer want to be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind, we want to let our thoughts be renewed, even in this area. God has included these words of Paul's for a reason, in order to teach us, instruct us, and even form the way we think. So that's how we want to enter into that this evening. So if you have your Bibles open with me to Romans 13. Romans 13, we're going to cover the entire chapter this evening.

Now, as you turn there, let's just remember where we were last week. The end of Romans 12, Paul outlined how the gospel brings us into a new way of living. A way of living marked by genuine love. We don't want to be people who fake love. We want to be authentically loving, and we can't do that on our own, but the gospel can bring that about. And as we live out genuine, authentic love that will transform our life together, it'll transform what the church is like. It'll be a life giving, "giving up self for one another" type of community. It will be transformative.

But second, Paul also talked about how our genuine love changes the way we engage with the broader world. It is a radically different life that we are called to step into. When we encounter evil, Paul said, we don't return evil for evil. Instead, we return blessing. We bless those who persecute. We do that knowing ultimately that God is in charge, and he is the judge, and he will do his job. There will be a day in the future where God will set everything right and we count on that day.

But Paul also closed by reminding us of something else. It is possible that through our love extended to enemies, towards those that persecute us, it's possible that God might even use that to save some, to bring some into a place of repentance. And we long for that. We hope for that. So as Paul closed that chapter, he closed it with these words. He said, "Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. God's plan, subversive plan, for overcoming evil in the world with good. And he called us to participate with him in that plan.

Now as we turn to chapter 13, I think it's important that we keep that context in mind, this call to genuine love, and also the reality of this cosmic battle of good and evil in the world. A question that naturally arises as we consider this final day that we await when God will judge evil, a question that naturally arises: So does that mean that, until that day, evil just gets to get away with it? That's a natural question that we want to ask, and Paul is going to answer it, and the answer is going to be, "not at all." God has established a restraint in the world for evil. That's what he's going to talk about. Beginning in verse one, he says:

1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.

Now, that's the verse that I opened with in our question. I read from the New Living Translation, or that's the one I quoted to you, because I do find that it captures Paul's tone quite well. It's a punchy statement. Emphatic. The New Living says, "Everyone must submit to governing authorities." I think if we hear that sentence, we can acknowledge Paul's words are not all that difficult. The part of us that maybe wants to get down there and say, "okay, let's really figure out what he's saying there," is motivated more, perhaps, by our, well, the fact that we struggle with what he's saying. That doesn't naturally sound like something we like to do.

And so our natural inclination when we hear him say, "everyone must submit to governing authorities," is to say, "okay, but aren't there some exceptions?" And I will acknowledge here at the very beginning, there are. I believe there are exceptions for us in this. This is not a call from Paul to grant unquestioned allegiance to governments. That's not what Paul's calling us to. We want to get to the exceptions. We're going to do that.

But before we do that, I want to wrestle with this text. To feel the weight of it, the discomfort of it, even. Quite confident that Paul's first hears in Rome, in that Roman Church, I'm quite confident when this letter was read to them, when they heard this sentence, I am confident it was uncomfortable to them. If they were here for the question that I asked you all as we began, I have no doubt that immediately to their mind would probably come one person. One man who sat at the very time, lived just down the street in Rome—they would have thought about Caesar, the emperor. And his name was Nero, and Nero is infamous.

We all are fairly familiar with him, but let me tell you about him for a moment, and what it would have meant for them to hear, "everyone must submit to governing authorities." Nero, at the time of the writing of this letter was probably 19 years old, a teenager, a boy, ruler of the world. Most powerful man on the earth. Now, Nero came to power because his mom, who also was a conniving politician, essentially organized an assassination of her husband so that her son could ascend to the throne. That's how Nero came to power. Shortly after that, he then arranged for the assassination, the poisoning of his stepbrother, his younger stepbrother, so that he would have no competitors to the throne. All of that is prior to when Paul wrote Romans.

Now, as Nero's reign would continue in time, he would eventually assassinate his mother. Then he would organize a large scale, systematic persecution of Christians that was severe beyond anything we can imagine. This was a bad guy. I am quite confident that whatever political leader you had in your mind, they aren't worse than Nero. I am confident about that. And yet, Paul wrote what he did. He said what he said. That we as Christians are to submit ourselves willingly, we're to place ourselves under, those in government, those who have governing authority.

Now, for us, in our context, that would mean the national, state, local level. We're to submit to them. And at the very least, for us, practically, that would mean that, certainly, we should be people who submit and follow and obey the laws that they have established. That should be our general posture. Paul is calling us to that. Now, the question is, why? Why would he make this statement? Why would he say it so strongly? And that's what he gets to at the second half of verse 1. He says:

> *1 For there is no authority except from God, and those* [that is the governing authorities, those] *which exist are established by God.*

We're to submit to governing authorities, Paul says, because God has given them that authority and he has established them. Pretty simple. Pretty straightforward statement. And depending on maybe who you had in your mind, that will be something that you would either say, "that's great" because you like that person, or "I'm not so sure about that" because you don't like that person.

Now, as we move on, I just want to stop for a moment, though, and acknowledge the mystery around what Paul is saying here. You'll remember that as we were walking through Romans 9 through 11, and we are talking about this, this truth, this reality, that there are two things that seem to be competing, that both are true, when it comes to God's sovereignty and human responsibility. As we read Romans 9 through 11, we said, I don't think it's within our minds to resolve that. We have to hold those things in tension and say this is a deep mystery. Somehow, God is absolutely sovereign. He is orchestrating everything. And also, we as human beings have responsibility.We have freedom. We have to hold those two things in tension.

In much the same way, based on what Paul just said, I think we have to hold in tension the fact that elections, for example, have consequences. And God establishes leaders. Both of those things can be true. Elections have consequences. After an election, it's coming up here in a few weeks, someone will win and another person will lose, and it would be completely justified to say the winner organized a better campaign. They did a better job of getting out the vote. Maybe they had a better platform. Could be a number of reasons, and all of those things could very well be true, and simultaneously, biblically, we have to affirm, God establishes leaders. Somehow in his mysterious sovereign will, he is organizing all things.

So here's what that means. When you think of a president or a governor or a mayor, the authority they have has been granted to them by God, And God has positioned them, has established them. Now, our hope is that they would know that. That's what I deeply hope. I hope they would be aware of it. They would be humbled by it, and they would say, "I have to steward this responsibility well for God and for his glory." That is our deep hope.But whether or not a leader knows that or not does not change the fact that God sovereignly oversees these things. He has granted authority, and he has established those who lead. That's what Paul just said.

So we're to submit to governing authorities, ultimately, because this is part of God's sovereign hand in the world. We're seeing his hand working and we're acknowledging his granting of authority. Now, as Paul continues, he's going to give us a very obvious implication then of this truth. Verse 2, he says:

> *2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.*

So if what Paul has said is true, and we affirm that it is, to resist authority, to have a posture of being against governmental authority, is, Paul says, literally to be resisting God. To be disobeying authority is to be disobeying God. That's what Paul's saying. I can say it to you confidently because he said it, not me, okay? That's what logically flows from what he has already said.

Now, he uses this phrase "the ordinance of God," and that essentially is a reference to the fact that this is how God has chosen to order the world. He has chosen to establish governments and governmental authority in his ordering of the world. Now, we're going to get, in just a moment, to the purpose of government. I believe verses 3 and 4 really make that clear. But we have to acknowledge here that to resist governing authorities is essentially to resist the way that God has sovereignly chosen to order the world. And Paul says that those who do that will essentially move towards a place of condemnation. That is looking forward to that final day of judgment when those who are diametrically opposed to God and his ways, the way he's established the world and the way he's ordered the world—in that day, God will judge those people who resist the way he set things up. Now he continues, verse 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; 4 for it* [that is governing authorities, it] *is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.*

I believe verses 3 and 4 give us a good biblical definition of God's intended purpose and role for government. Government exists in the plan of God to promote and commend what is good and to restrain and punish what is evil. That's what God intends.

Now, remember last week, we said it's not our job to pay back evil for evil. That's God's job, and there will be a final day—we've talked about it a number of times already this evening—there will be a day where he does that finally and ultimately he sets everything right. But until that day, for the time being, what Paul is saying is that God has established governing authorities as his ministers or servants, to us, to the public, for good. That's their role.

This word minister is so interesting. It's the word that we in the Church get the role of "deacon" from. It just means to serve. It's a position of service to us, to you, he said, for good. The promotion and commending of what is good. And also, conversely, the resisting and punishing of that which is evil. And that's why he said, they can bear the sword. That means they can punish, they can bring consequences down on those who do and practice evil, they can go so far as to kill someone who is practicing evil without ceasing. That's what the government has been given authority to do.

Now, what Paul's saying is that, because as Christians were people of genuine love, and when we genuinely love, we seek and do that which is good, we should have no

fear of governing authorities. Because governing authorities seek to promote and commend that which is good. That's the logic of what he's saying. And that's the way we hope it all works out. But I think we all can acknowledge, it's not always that way is it? It's a logical objection. Because each of us as we consider our world today, as we consider the course of human history, we can name an endless number of governments that seem to have been more intent on promoting evil and punishing good. That's a very fair and and logical objection. Completely understandable.

But as we continue, I just want to acknowledge the writer of this letter, okay? Paul knew that. Paul was a victim, he suffered, at the hand of an unjust government. Paul was jailed, arrested and jailed, unjustly in Philippi, by governing authorities. In 2 Corinthians, which was written before Romans, Paul tells us that he was beaten with a rod three separate times, and that was a form of punishment put out by the Roman authorities.

So Paul was a victim of injustice and evil at the hands of governing authorities. So Paul knows. I think he would acknowledge, "I get it. You're right, governments don't always operate this way." But we have to affirm the general principle. The general principle that he is calling believers to is that of submitting to governing authorities because that's part of God's design for the world, and how our society is to function for the time being. Now, do I believe that our elected officials understand this. Some. But do all of them? No. But does their awareness of it, or their ignorance of it, make it less true? No, this is God's word. This is how this works. This is what he intends. So he continues, he says:

> *5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection [to submit], not only because of wrath, but also for conscience's sake.*

In light of all that's been said, Paul is saying, here are some motivations for submission. First wrath. In other words, the government has the authority to punish wrongdoing. That's one motivation. But here's a better motivation. For conscience's sake. In other words, as people who have been made privy by God himself as to how the world is ordered and how it is to operate, our conscience drives us to submit ultimately to him. If we submit to governing authorities, it ultimately is an expression of our submission to God and to his ways. That's what Paul's saying. Now he continues and he's gonna talk about another topic that we love to talk about. Taxes. Verse 6:

> *6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.*

Submit to governing authorities and pay your taxes. Be blessed and be warmed—we'll see you next week! It's a doozy. Why should we pay taxes? Well, Paul just says, because it's what's owed. It's what's owed to these ministers, these servants—they're public servants, that's what they are in the plan of God. And so we pay them what they're due, help them live and help them do that which they've been called by God to do. And we have to affirm it's a good thing. It's a good thing they're called to do. It's part of the plan of God.

So there's a number of different things. He says taxes, and then he says custom—custom would essentially be indirect taxes. It'd be like paying our parking meter. Fees. Honor and fear. These are things we do, and we do them ultimately because of our love and our submission and our understanding of God and the way he's organized our world. That's our motivation.

So, What does all this mean? We're going to stop here for a moment after these seven verses because Paul's going to shift gears a little bit in just a moment. But I mentioned at the beginning that there are exceptions. And we do need to talk about that. These verses are difficult. We want to understand them as people that want to have a renewed mind. We want to think rightly about these things. And I think it's helpful for us to make a distinction.

We are clearly called to submit. But that is different than offering blind, unquestioned allegiance. That's not what we're called to. There's only one to whom we offer absolute allegiance. To God and God alone. Ultimately, he is our sovereign. Our ultimate submission to him will sometimes mean that it takes priority over something that perhaps an evil government is asking us to submit to.

Now, because our first allegiance is to him, that means that there will be times where if a government would demand that I do something by law that is contrary to God and his ways, I will absolutely resist. I am called to resist. My submission to governing authorities does not supersede my submission and my allegiance to God and his ways.

Now, if the government would come and say, listen, you can no longer preach the gospel by law, you cannot preach the gospel—and by the way, in other countries, missionaries have heard this before—of course we would say, sorry, I'm not submitting. In Acts 4, there's a story of Peter where he says, "Now you tell me, who should I listen to? Should we obey God or men?" And when it is up against obeying God and obeying men, we always obey God. That's the first exception that we have to keep in mind. We are to submit to governing authorities, but that does not mean they have absolute rights over us. That's not what Paul is saying. That's not what we are preaching. That's not what we believe.

So practically speaking, now, what might that look like? And the first thing I want to say is exactly what we just said. It means that unless a law is directly guiding us to disobey God, we should submit to and follow those laws. Now, if a law would call us to disobey God, we should subvert that law and disobey that law. That's the first general principle. That'd be a practical application of what it means to submit to governing authorities.

Second implication that I just think follows from this text—this isn't exactly what Paul was saying, but I just think it, because we're understanding the role of government, I think it matters. We don't live in the first century. Our next leader is not the son of the current Caesar. We live in a system of representative government in which we have a say in who our governing authorities are. And because of that, understanding the way God has set up the world, I believe we as Christians should take advantage of the system within which we live and should be engaged in the political conversation. I think it's a good thing for us. We understand what God's doing in the world. I think it's helpful for us to be engaged in it because of that.

Now, please understand, that's going to look different for every single person. But as individual Christians, to be engaged, to not be ignorant of these things, is, I believe, a good "renewing the mind biblical view" of our responsibility in the world. What we absolutely cannot do is give in to the moment which falls on one side, to be a cynic that just says, "it's so crazy, I don't want to even talk about it." I understand, I understand how that feels. I watched football today, and so I saw commercials today. And I know the tone of the commercials. And it's so, it's so volatile and so toxic. It is easy to say, "you know what, I just want nothing to do with it." But we as believers are called to thoughtful, "renewed mind" engagement in our world, and it's perfectly appropriate for us to engage in this way.

Now, consequently, I do want to say something that maybe we haven't said a whole lot, but my hope is just as I pray that God would call missionaries out from this body, people would feel the call of God to serve him in that way. I hope that there are people within this body that God would prompt and they would feel called or compelled to step into this realm of public service. Because we need good governing leaders. We need governing leaders that are filled with virtue, that have been transformed by the gospel, that walk according to the Spirit and know what is good according to God's definition of good. We need that. And so my prayer is that if you're feeling maybe prompted to that, that you wouldn't think somehow that's a dirty occupation. The biblical view is very clear. God has set this up. Those who lead in these contexts are ministers, servants. They serve a purpose in the world.

Third, this also means because we are people who absolutely trust that God is in charge, when an election doesn't go our way, or a politician that we don't like is

elected, we don't need to respond the way the world responds. What I find in the world is fear and doom. I think we can be disappointed, but we can trust God. We know that he is moving his plan forward. He is sovereign. Romans 13, 1 to 7, makes it abundantly clear God is in charge, and we as his people have to absolutely stand on that. When it feels as though the world is unfolding and God is off the throne, don't believe it—it is a lie. He's never given up the throne, and he is moving history forward. And we can trust him. Therefore, fear does not need to mark our lives, especially in this conversation.

Final point, this is a very complex topic.Very nuanced and we don't have time to go into all the nuances, but we did decide that two weeks from now, we're having a Rethink Workshop. You've probably seen a slide a number of times. We wanted to create a venue where we can talk about the complexities that are involved in a biblical view of this topic. We want to be people who have renewed minds, so we want to think deeply and biblically about these things. And so if this is something that's a wrestle for you, if you're cynical about all of it, I might challenge you to consider attending. October 30, October 31, you can register online. I'd invite you to join us there.

Okay, that's it for practical stuff. Now, where do we go from here? I thought I would talk for a moment, just because we're on a roll, about how dogs are better than cats. Just to say something else that will stir someone up!

As we move into these last verses, Paul takes that call to pay taxes and this understanding that taxes are what are due to those who are in governing authority, and he creatively twists it and has it point back at the community of faith. That's what Paul does. So he says in verse 8:

> *8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there's any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

We're to pay taxes because it's what's due. But there's one, there's one payment that we'll never fully pay. And it's our love for one another. Within this community, it's our, our unending debt of love, to continue to pour it out over and over. There will never be a moment within which we can say to one another, "you know what—I think I've adequately loved you now." The call within the community of faith is to be so filled with genuine love that it is incessant. It's just going out over and over and over again. Infinite love being poured out from an infinite God in his people. That's the call.

You'll remember we said last week that what it is to love someone is to seek what is good for them. Seek what is good. That is why Paul says love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans made it, has made it, abundantly clear. We are no longer under the rule of the Mosaic law. We're no longer under its stipulations. But we now, as people freed by the gospel and filled with the pirit, are becoming people of genuine, authentic love. And love does no wrong to a neighbor, Paul says.

Therefore, if I love my neighbor, I will not murder them. I will not steal from them. Love fulfills it, it sums it all up. So we'll be people who love our neighbors, and our neighbors begin certainly in our family and then extend out from there. It's just those who are near to us. Those who are near to you in your workplace. Those who are near to you in your neighborhood. We are people called to extend love to them. Love without ceasing. Finally, in this last paragraph, Paul says:

> *11 Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now, salvation is near to us than when we believed. 12 The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.* [All behaviors that mark the life of darkness. Not that.] *14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.*

As chapter 13 closes, you can just hear the passion from Paul, the urgency. He just layers these different graphic images upon one another, and they're all pointing towards one end, all pointing towards the truth. An urgent reminder to believers to live this day, and to live every day, in light of the end. In light of the end that Paul said is drawing near because, the biblical truth is, that according to the biblical time, God's time, ever since he sent his Son, we are living in the final moment. We're living in the moment where he is going to set all things right. The final moments of God's mysterious and grand timeline. It is coming close, it is drawing near, Paul says.

He's offering these words as a wake up call—the gospel—as an alarm, awaking us from our slumber, telling us to set aside the deeds of darkness. To no longer hit the snooze button in life, but to bounce out of bed. To throw off the covers, to put on new clothes, to put on Christ. The gospel is putting on Christ. That's the freedom available to us.

Now, what does that mean and what's it look like? I think I would just say it looks like everything we've talked about for the past three weeks in Romans 12 and Romans 13—it's offering up our bodies as a living sacrifice, it's no longer being conformed to the world, being transformed by the renewing of the mind. To embrace a genuine love flowing from the gospel is to not repay evil for evil. To live

in light of the end is to submit to God's design, his order for things. All of this is this new freedom we have, the new clothes we get to put on. Christ clothes. The gospel, Paul says, is putting on Christ.

As his people, let us this week, let us set aside the dark clothes, the clothes that mark the night, and all that comes with the nighttime, knowing that the dawn is coming. We see the light on the horizon. The day of the Lord is near, and because of that, let us put on Christ. Let us put on his character. Let us step into the love that he has made available to us. Let us live in the newness of life.

As we close, we thought we should end our time together by praying about some of these things. You know, scripture calls us to pray for those who are in leadership, pray for governing authorities. Pray for our neighbors. Pray for our world. And over the past few months, we've been talking about how do we bring some of that into our corporate gatherings more often where we're actually stopping and not talking about prayer, but we're actually praying together right now.

So Caleb is going to come out, and Caleb's gonna lead us through some moments of prayer together.

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