

Submitting to authorities

Romans 13, 1-7



[1](#) Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. [2](#) Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. [3](#) For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. [4](#) For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. [5](#) Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. [6](#) This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. [7](#) Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

The poet Schiller was an enthusiastic spectator of bell casting. This fine art inspired him to write a poem. It was clear that in his poem Schiller was comparing the massive church bells with human life. According to Schiller, the bell symbolizes the phases of a person's life from birth to death. And according to Schiller, people are embedded in the community and the state. The bell calls us to work, to celebrate and to mourn; it accompanies people throughout their lives. Schiller consciously criticized the violence and unrest of the French Revolution through the bell poem. And thus called on his listeners to abide by the rules. The rules, as Schiller sees them, call the individual to obey and to conform. When Paul says: "Everyone should be subject to the authorities that have power over him," he seems to be saying the same thing as Schiller. So does this mean that we Christians and the church should stay clear of politics? This can be understood in a similar way as a mayor of a small town in lower saxony suggested. When the local pastor was called there, he also had to introduce himself to the local mayor. And the conversation went something like this: The mayor said: "Everyone should know where there proper place ist. The mayor has his place, and the pastor has his. This way everything is nicely ordered and the status quo maintained. "The pastors," said the mayor, "...should stay on the pulpit,..." where they belong, so that the politicians can continue with their important work unhindered. Paul's words for today seem, at least at first glance, to support the words of this mayor:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God; and where there is authority, it is ordained by God.

According to Paul, we should submit to the governing authorities. And we should do so because the governing authorities are appointed by God. What we quickly notice is that the world is not from God. There are really bad things happening in our world. And it is precisely in states where politicians have absolute power that absolute and merciless oppression of the people takes place. When I hear this sentence from Paul: "Everyone must be subject to the authorities," then the question comes to mind: "Is this authority really from God? By all human standards, it seems to be directly from Satan. But the astonishing thing is this: In Paul's time, the state was even

worse. Paul knew very well about the evil of those in power. Paul experienced this first hand. He was whipped countless times, arrested, and ultimately even killed by the state. Should we accept all of this in silence? This question is very important, because even in our time there is unlimited persecution of Christians. People are killed in the most cruel ways in the name of the state. And we are supposed to submit to all that? It is also important to ask the question of how we as Christians can live in a non-Christian state. Should we follow the mayor's advice and keep everything separate, just like in my example above? According to that, the church is responsible for Sunday. And during the rest of the week, people should do what they want or what their calling is. According to the Hindu law of karma this can mean anything. To each his own: for one person, that means that he should cheat, for another, that he can beat his wife, for another, that he can indulge his racist feelings against other people; for yet another, that he can happily do his drug trade... Of course, we cannot simply accept all of this. With all of this, we do notice that we Christians naturally come into conflict with some things in our world. Sometimes this can be extremely dangerous. For some Christians for eg. The following question may arise. "What do I do with my cross if I have to sell kebabs in a Muslim shop?" or "Do I confess my faith in Christ in everyday life and do I say openly what is right and what is wrong? Or should I not proclaim my faith openly?" It is a misunderstanding to believe that only Sundays belongs to God. Our whole life belongs to God. And because we humans live in a state where political orders prevail, these orders also belong to God. But how do we deal with it when our world does not run according to God's will? That is the question we have to ask ourselves today.

How do church and politics relate to each other? In Islam, this is made simple. Islam itself is a political program and in its strictest form simply prohibits any other opinion. This means that one Islamic party controls the entire life of its citizens. As we know, Christ said that his kingdom is not of this world! In doing so, he fundamentally rejected a Christian political program. And all attempts to spread Christianity as a state religion have therefore failed miserably. IN most cases, people who wanted to govern in a Christian way are no better than anyone else. It was not without reason that Martin Luther separated the political state from the Christian church. Paul does the same when he describes the world as the provisional kingdom of God and our calling as Christians as the ultimate kingdom. In the provisional kingdom, Paul expects us, just as in Schiller's poem „The Bell“, to submit ourselves to the cycle of birth, life, marriage, work and death. We do all of this, but in the knowledge that our life in Christ is hidden in God. So we are not just citizens of a country, but much more we have heard God's call and are his citizens. We listen to the gospel and find our purpose and our identity in the gospel. In our lives we are anchored in the world but our heart remains with God.

But God's call from beyond does not make us apathetic or speechless in the face of the world here. It is precisely God's call that gives our actions in the state purpose and goal. This can be seen by following eg. The state does not deserve respect in itself. Not because the political system is more or less to our liking at the moment, or because I like this or that politician. No, the state deserves our respect so to say „second-hand.“ Namely insofar as we believe in God and we understand that God has given the state a certain responsibility. That does not mean that we accept the state and everything it does uncritically. We would not be the salt of the earth if we followed the state blindly. Where the state violates God's order, we as the church must also fulfill our prophetic task and point this out. When Paul is before the High Council in Acts 23 and the high priest Ananias orders Paul to be struck in the face, Paul reacts with skillful criticism of the state:

"God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit to judge me according to the law, and you have me beaten contrary to the law." (Acts 23:3)

Certainly the centuries have shown that the state has not only spread "benefits". And at that point it was and remains our responsibility to speak out against it.

And yet Paul calls on us to respect even the unchristian state. For Paul recognizes God's order even in a completely unjust and unchristian state. For behind these orders stands God himself. Just imagine what the world would look like if we had to live for just one month without a regulated supply of food, water, and energy. God rules in secret so that these orders continue to function. Even when the political systems are on the wrong path. We Christians do not respect these systems because we blindly trust the state. No! We only do this because we blindly trust God. And yet we always come into conflict with the state when the state tries to place itself above God and his commandments. For example, Justin Martyr said when he was asked to worship the emperor: "Therefore we worship God alone. But in other things we serve you with joy" (Apology 17). This sentence of Justin's was spoken out of pure obedience to God, but was understood as a very political statement. So much so, that Justin had to pay for it with his life. The same thing still happens today. When Muslims convert to Christianity in Iran or other countries, it is because of faith in God that they do this. But before the state, exactly such people are accused of being spies or even executed. Such trials are political. ..The question now is what we owe the state. Paul explains this in these words:

Render therefore to each one what you owe: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs are due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

It is our duty to pay taxes, and we sin against God and the state when we cheat the state. It is also our duty that we live together well and work towards a good life with our fellow citizens. We care about the environment, about the fair distribution of food. But none of this should ever become our main task. Christians are also constantly tempted to focus on political issues. In some churches you get the feeling that a lot of good things are said; a lot of good things are done. But in all of this you get the feeling that Jesus himself is missing. So we Christians have sold our souls. We accepted the good gifts that Jesus gives us, but rejected Jesus himself. Back then, confessing faith in Jesus was so important to Christians that they paid for it with their lives. That still happens today. We owe it to God to obey the state. But we also owe it to God not to obey the state when it asks us to act against God's commandments. Then we owe it to God to denounce the mistakes and bring them to light. For example, when the state kills unborn or unworthy life. Or when we have legitimate fears that our brothers or sisters will be killed in their homeland if they are deported. We can do this with the same calmness and clarity as Jesus did. Without any use of violence. Amen