

# Reading Romans 13:1-7

## Using a Dialogical Lens

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# Applying the Dialogical Lens to a Scripture Passage

- 1. Point out the dialogical aspects of the passage.**
- 2. Determine what is at stake.**
- 3. Identify the values.**
- 4. Explain how God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit is active.**
- 5. Recognize what the dialogue is teaching us.**
- 6. Suggest possible next steps.**

## Romans 13:1-7

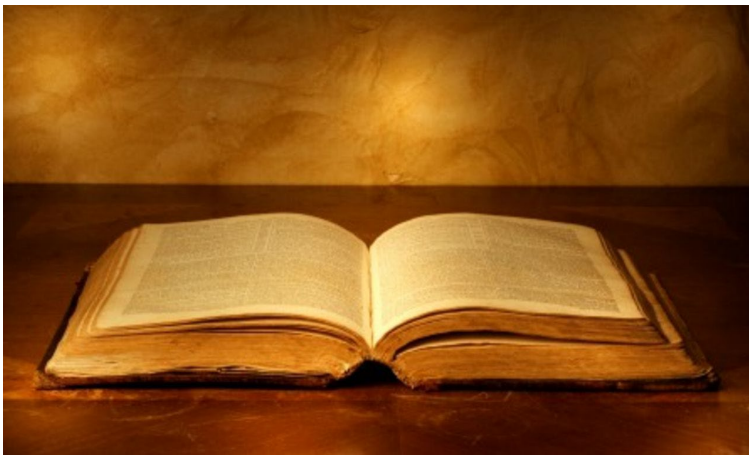
Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. <sup>3</sup>For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; <sup>4</sup>for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

<sup>5</sup>Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. <sup>7</sup>Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

# 1. Point out the dialogical aspects of the passage.

- a. Presumed author, and intended audience?
- b. Social, cultural, and political forces either in the background or directly present in the passage?

- a. Paul wrote the letter to the church in Rome circa 57-58 CE.
- b. “Conceivably, the Roman Christians had lingering fears about the governing authorities because, several years earlier some of them, along with members of the Jewish community, had been expelled from the city by an edict of the emperor, Claudius.” (Victor Paul Furnish, “Living to God, Walking in Love: Theology and Ethics in Romans”; in *Reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. Jerry L. Sumney, ed. SBL Press, 2012. 198.)

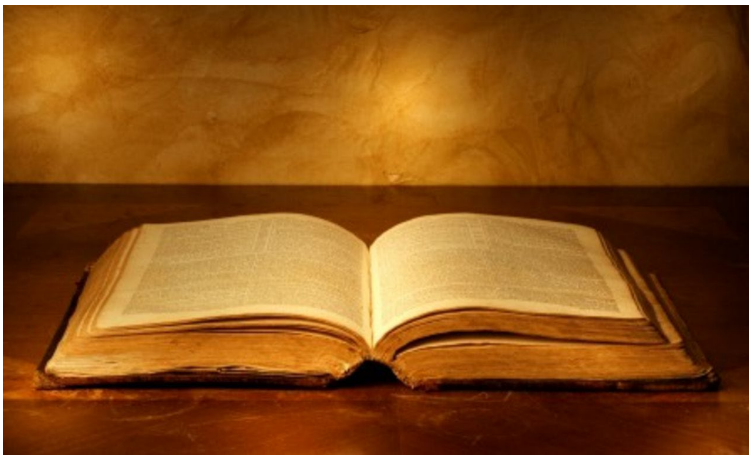


# 1. Point out the dialogical aspects of the passage.

c. Other books or authors in the Bible implicitly in conversation with this text or author?

- a. As the Hebrew scriptures established, governments must be accountable to God for how they use their power. According to **Deuteronomy 17:14-20**, this means no ruler is above the law.

“When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. <sup>19</sup>It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, <sup>20</sup>neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.”



# 3. Identify the values

D. Where are there gaps? What are the things the dialogue partners are unlikely to agree upon?



“Paul’s topic is not political authority or, in particular, Roman imperial authority. It is, more concretely, whether believers are obliged to accept the authority of civic officials and adhere to the laws and regulations they administer. While he argues that they do have this obligation, the ensuing discussion shows that **he does not regard it as absolute**” (Furnish, 197).

“Paul assumes that the primary responsibility of civic officials is to **maintain the public welfare** by supporting ‘good’ conduct and punishing ‘bad’ conduct and, further, that officials are, as a rule, just and wise in fulfilling this responsibility (vv. 3–4). He does not raise the question of what to do about officials who are corrupt or who govern unjustly or unwisely.” (198)

HOWEVER . . .

# 4. Explain how God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit is active.

A. What is God doing in the midst of this interchange?

B. Is God's action explicit, implicit, or apparently absent?



“Paul declares that all political authority has been instituted by God, for “there is no authority except from God” (v. 1). He, therefore, repeatedly identifies civic officials as God’s “servants”, thereby implying that they are accountable to God.” (Furnish, 198).

# 4. Explain how God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit is active.

C. How is the larger community wrestling with or expressing their faith in God?



“Paul’s instruction to be subject to the governing authorities is radically qualified by the appeal in 12:2. Rather than conforming to the claims of “this present age,” believers should seek to discern the will of God through careful inquiry, reflection, and the judicious weighing of options.

Clearly, then, whatever subjection to civil authorities may require in any given instance must not be at odds with the believers’ understanding of their responsibility before God.

Indeed, Paul’s comment that one should “be subject” not just from fear of punishment but “because of conscience” (v. 5) suggests that he views subjection to political authority as always conditional on its being in accord with God’s will.” (Furnish, 198).



# 5. Recognize what the dialogue is teaching us.

A. What is this exchange, dialogue, or conversation teaching us about what it means to be church in the midst of contentious public issues?

This means that any governing authority that gives itself god-like power with no accountability, which the Supreme Court has granted the office of the presidency (and to itself) through the immunity ruling, is abusing its role.

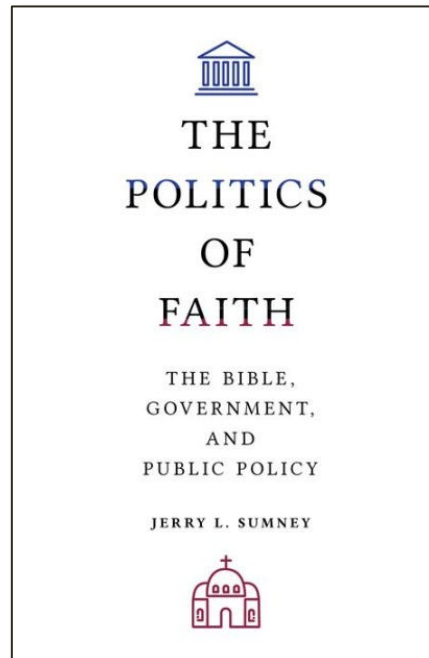


# 5. Recognize what the dialogue is teaching us.

B. What can we learn about being faithful people who engage the conflicts and sin of the world, while maintaining the commitment to grace, hope, and love?

Jerry L. Sumney, *The Politics of Faith*, Fortress Press, 2020

“Acknowledging that governments are set in place by God does not mean God’s people should not oppose their unjust policies,” (89). On the contrary, “Like the Israelite prophets, Paul can say the government is both there by the will of God and that it does evil that God’s people should resist,” (90).



# 6. Suggest possible next steps

- A. Next steps we might take based on what this biblical passage models for us?
- B. Public concerns God is inviting us to engage? Are we being invited into dialogue with each other, with this passage, and with God about specific justice issues?

- The Supreme Court ruling has violated not only the rule of civil law, but God’s law by elevating the office of the president to a level beyond accountability and justice.
- Thus, as Sumney writes, Romans 13:1-10 “might suggest that Christians be good citizens and accept the authority of the state when it does not violate their faith and work to change it when it does” (91).
- Because the Supreme Court has violated our faith, we must work to change it by voting for those who would reform and expand the Court and reverse this ruling.

