

## *A Servant for Your Good*

Romans 13:1-7

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So I hear we're in an election year. A few months ago—couple months ago now—we as a pastoral team alieved that given that the summer was approaching and we have typically done topical sermon series during the summer months, that it would be an opportune time to consider the topic of God and Governance. And our guiding passage upon which the series is built, is the passage from which I'll be preaching this morning. That being said, one of the temptations of course, is to try to say everything I need to say by way of introduction today, and I can't do that. Lucky for you. But we will be looking at *God and Governance* from the Old and New Testaments, so that, and this is clear—to be clear—we will not tell you what to do, but we encourage you to consider the scriptures deeply and sincerely and to utilize the wisdom that God gives you as citizens of this country.

But the important thing to remember is that we will find the perspectives on God and Governance in odd places. It will be frustrating, however, because it will not answer all of your questions. And during this series we will have opportunities where we will do an extended Q&A times---yet to be announced, but we will---downstairs in our community room after a service, where you can ask some of the questions that perhaps the series brings up, things that you wrestle with. Again, you're likely not going to get all the answers that you seek, but it's good for us to discuss these things. What does it mean to be a Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, living in democratic republic, in a world that we find ourselves in at present? That's an important question. We hope and pray that God will give wisdom to all of us as we seek to work out our faith.

Last year, as we were going through the book of Acts, one of the books that I had in my study by way of preparation, talks about some of the political backdrop, the context, to what are considered really one book---though separate letters---the gospel of Luke, and the second gospel of Luke, the book of Acts---often referred to as Luke-Acts. And in Luke-Acts we have a very large portion of the New Testament in which we see Christians who have to go before the legal authority before them. And as they go before that legal authority they have ways to respond and issues to deal with that's instructive. But a part of that instructive nature is understanding the cultural backdrop. This is just one brief word, one brief sentence, that helps us to have some perspective that will guide us in our discussion.

First, speaking of what the Christian mission is: that is, to proclaim Christ, who He is, his life, death, and resurrection. That is the Christian mission. The proclamation of these things. So this writer states, "The Christian mission, as it is narrated by Luke, is not a counter-state. It does not, that is, seek to replace Rome, or to take back Palestine, Asia, or Achaia. To the contrary, such a construal of Christian politics is resolutely and repeatedly rejected." To follow Luke's narrative, to read Christianity, not as a cult for insurrection, but as a testimony to the reality of the resurrection. At each and every point at which fellow Christians are brought before governing officials to give an account of the Christian mission, there are two things that become extremely clear. It is absolutely never conflated with the idea of insurrection. It is never used as a tool among our founding disciples and the early church, Christianity and the Christian mission is not about the taking back of nation states to serve as counter-states to the state. It is about an appeal to the resurrection of the one and only King a Christian has: Jesus Christ.

Therefore, before we begin to look at any of this passage and any of the scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments, if you---and I recognize not every is---but if you are a professing Christian, first and foremost you are a citizen of heaven. You are not first and foremost a citizen of the United States. You are first and foremost a citizen of heaven. That, therefore, makes anyone who professes Christ a sojourner, a pilgrim, in this life, [placed in a particular time and in a particular place under governing authorities. Therefore, while we may have been born in this country or whatever country you may have been born in, we're under authority. But your identity is as a child of God, a child of the King. That then helps us from the temptation to combine Christian faith with any politic. But it enables us, by God's grace with wisdom, guided by the scriptures, to achieve some degree of objectivity so that we can seek to be faithful to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the midst of living as citizens of a nation state.

We look together this morning at an important passage from Paul written to Christians at Rome. And remember, Paul would lose his life at Rome, so he writes as one who feels the acute tension between being a Christian, a citizen of heaven, and a citizen of Rome. Let's look together at Romans 13:1-7:

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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, with my brothers and sisters in Christ this morning, we sit before You, humbled by Your power and Your goodness and we are encouraged and empowered by Your grace. We ask for wisdom from Your word to discern what it means to follow Christ and live in this world. May it be to Your glory and to Your honor as we wrestle with these important questions and what it means that the government is a servant for our good. Will you help us, Lord? Help the teacher. In Jesus name, Amen.

You see before you this morning, in your outline: Establishment, Purpose, and Response. Establishment, Purpose, and Response. The Establishment we'll see in verses 1-2; the Purpose for the government instituted is in verses 3-5; and then our Response we see indicated in verse 2, but also 6-7. And then we will have to talk about what is implied, in terms of our response, by these things. Again, brothers and sisters, I ask you for patience, because. . . write your questions down, but know that they will not all be answered this morning. We've looked forward to this series, but also we think, "Uh-oh." And I encourage the discussion, but ask you for your patience.

The Establishment of Government. It is clear from this passage that the governing authorities that we have over us, and that we, by implication, have in other nations, are there because God has allowed it. God has placed them there. This is not all that we can say about the establishment of governing authorities. We will look at how they originally were established from the Old Testament and why that was the case. But sufficient to this task, and the task at hand with this text, is this: that there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. But the thing we must understand is that the establishment of government and of governing authorities around the world does not therefore mean that God supports the way they exert that authority. But rather that they are established. In fact, what we will see as we look throughout the Old Testament is indeed that God not only establishes the governing authorities, He will actually use a wicked nation, who does not honor Him, to use as a tool of discipline on other nations. And then He will destroy the one nation that He rose up against the other.

There is an element of mystery here which I nor any preacher can actually understand or adequately explain to the human mind. And that is this: God is sovereign, and He has allowed these things to take place by the goodness of His will, and His ways are above our ways. He will do things, which are to the human mind and eyes and understanding, utterly inscrutable. But that doesn't mean that God sponsors evil or that His will is not good. It's that He has a purpose. And that purpose, it seems to be from this purpose—rather before the purpose is to establish—that God does not leave us without authority. We are under authority.

But this all comes, of course, at the end of a very long discussion that Paul has had with the church at Rome that ultimately we're under His authority. And that as we seek to live under authority with those governing structures that are around us, we submit to them and show subjection and honor towards them because we show honor and respect and subjection to God our Father. That it is not by accident we've been born here. It is not an accident that President Barrack Obama has been serving for eight years, or Bush before him, or Clinton before him, or whoever will serve us next. These are things which He has put in place.

And when Paul uses the phrase, "Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment," [v. 2] I recognize that that sentence brings up all kinds of questions. For example, should the United States have broken away from British rule? That is showing resistance to authority, is it not? What about the Civil Rights Movement, that resisted government sponsored racism? Separation: is that resisting the government? In other words, we can't simply lay an easy question over scripture and attempt to find reductionist answers. We must come before this passage and simply look at that one phrase---"that whoever resists"--- is itself a very complex statement. And that some resistance may be completely biblical, and other resistance completely in disobedience to God the King.

But for this morning's purpose, it is appropriate to recognize that the governing structures that are over us—and let's deal with us—that the governing structures that we have in the United States of America are here because God has established them. Therefore we are under His authority and therefore placed under the authority of our governing structures, which we have a say towards. But even as such, it is very easy to understand what it looks like to resist, does it not? We can resist. . . . Ok, sure, we want to obey the law, but in our hearts there's all kinds of insurrection happening. How do we deal with that? But at the end of the day for the Christian, it is never this: It is never "God is my King. You're not my president. You're not my congress. You're not my Supreme Court. God is my King." [No.] God is your King, but He's placed you here, and we have a governor, a county executive, ruling authorities all around us. We have our bosses. All of these things are here, and they are to use their authority by extension of what God has given them, even

though they may not recognize it as such. He has established it, therefore, we are called to live under it.

But what is the purpose then, of this governing structure? It seems clear. It is this: to execute justice and care for citizens. Sometimes those two are intertwined. But the purpose, of course, is the execution of justice. It says very clearly, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good." [v. 3] Even though the governing authorities over us—judges, police, all the things that go into our security apparatus and all these other things—even though they may not have one iota of faith, when they execute justice on those who do evil, they are doing God's will. And when they do, it is an example of God's common grace. We ought to give thanks that it is executed and done well.

And we ought to be praying that the execution of justice be done fairly. We ought to pray for it, we ought to seek. . .not only to pray for it, but to get involved. Become lawyers, become part of a judge's work. There are all kinds of things which we can do to seek to do justice and to do it rightly. To pray for those who serve in the police and all the various ranks of police and security. We too. . .if you are a Christian, and you believe that is something you're interested in---and we've got police officers here and those who've retired from police work, all of their lives--- we ought to be praying for them and we ought to consider, is that something God may be calling you to? Because we ought to be praying for those who function in these roles, that they do so with equity and with justice. And we ought to pray against injustice and help defend those who are being accused unjustly.

But that takes wisdom and nuance and not the 5 p.m. news that reduces things to headlines, that reduces things to very simplified, low-hanging, fruit, to exact from you an appropriate emotion. This calls us to wisdom. But they are called for God's purpose to execute justice, which is also by God's grace. This is God's grace to us, Christians---that we do these things not so that we can become Christians or prove that we're good Christians, but it ought to be the fruit of our Christian faith. And that is, by God's grace we ought to seek to live obedient lives to the laws that have been placed over us.

As a self-professed lead-foot, sometimes that's hard, isn't it. Fellow lead-foots, you know. There are all kinds of things that it's very easy to rationalize. *I'm in a hurry. They really don't give you a ticket unless you're ten miles over the speed limit.* You ever played that game? Or am I the only one. I know I'm not. And you slow down when you see the traffic camera, and you speed up when you're beyond it. Yes. That is a small, low-hanging fruit example. But the reality is, we ought, by God's grace, to hear the warning, to resist evil, and to do good.

The overwhelming testimony of the early church—the overwhelming testimony about the early church in the empire of Rome, is that Christians do make very good citizens. Because they were characterized, and the Christian faith is characterized, by seeking the flourishing of the world around us. And to seek the flourishing means, we do not use the law simply as a means for our own ends, but we seek to serve others, and we see others beyond ourselves. And that encourages us to become circumspect: the way we speak, the way we conduct ourselves. And we want to honor the laws around us, because we know ultimately we're under the King's authority, and He is the one we owe allegiance to. And to honor Him, we will honor these laws.

And as you note, later on in the passage, that includes taxes as well. Yes, we have plenty of ways that we can reduce our tax burden, and that is right, and that is legal. But when we take money

under the table, we underreport our income, that is also very much a part of the laws that have been placed over us. And it is hard to write that check. But in so doing, we're honoring the Lord. We're not just filling the IRS's coffers. Paul says clearly to "pay taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due." If we borrow money, we seek to pay it back. If we owe people, we take care of our debts. These are a part of the governing laws, and their purpose is for the execution of justice.

And something that is the other part of the purpose, and that is the care for citizens. Governments ought to take care of their citizens. It says not only are they a servant of God in terms of the sword, but it is also their job to be ministers of God to care for those under their care. And we ought to pray for that. But I recognize even that statement brings up a whole huge cake of messiness. Because we probably legitimately disagree around this room what the government ought to do, what it ought not to do. "Our government is too big." "Our government is too small." And we get locked into these debates. But the purpose is not to get locked into that debate, but to see that God actually intends for governments to care for its citizenry, recognizing He doesn't give us a blueprint for what that's to look like. And we get it right, we get it wrong, and we argue, and we bicker, but the core principle is there. It isn't just the church that is to care for those who are in need. The government around us is to do the same. And we ought to pray that it does it more effectively with justice and equity.

But what is our response as we begin this series? The response tells us. . . it says, "Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." [v. 2] It calls us away from insurrection. And what it ends with is showing honor and respect to those who are over us. So on the one hand, we can avoid insurrection, but we love the blood sport of political rancor in this country.

Recently a popular Christian author on Twitter, in referencing Hillary Clinton as the nominee for the Democratic party, called her "Hitler Clinton." And what began to arise was unfortunately the tribalism that characterizes our country and tribalism that characterizes the Christian church in the United States. There were those who said, "Oh, he was just kidding! It was just a joke!" And there were others who were highly offended. I can say to you with all authority, from God's word, that to call Hillary Clinton, "Hitler Clinton" is not showing her honor and respect. Whether you agree with her or don't agree with her, whether you like the presumptive nominee of the Republican party, Donald Trump, or not; at the end of the day we are called to do something that is even deeper than showing honor and respect to those who are and who may be our governing authorities.

We're actually called, as we read this morning, to give meals to those who are our enemies. Now that is a deeper ethic. Having wrestled with that one. . . Holy cow, do I fall short! But I will tell you as a student who grew up in the 80's, who took fascinating classes in history during the first Gulf War, who was around when Rush Limbaugh began his radio show, before FOX news and CNN, and all this stuff—I love the debate. I love the discussion. And those of you who know me, know I'm extremely opinionated. Good grief, I'm so sorry. But I love it! But the thing that I have to confess in my own heart are the ways in which I have allowed my own tribalism to lead me away from honor and respect and to dishonor others. And I was somehow maybe using my Christian faith as a shield, for why? Paul doesn't call us to that. He calls us to something that is extremely hard.

And I will finish this sermon because I have to, it's time. But one of the books that I read that contained a number of articles when I was in seminary, called me to a great deal of confession and conviction. This book was written twenty years ago. It was true then; it is crazy true now, within

the particular environment that we find ourselves. The author, his name is Os Guinness, a well-known Christian philosopher, teacher, pastor, writer. And so I leave you with this call, and we will end by understanding where we began: that the Lord is our King. So here we go. . .

Scour the New Testament from beginning to end, and it would be impossible to find a single line to justify the present evangelical politics of anxiety and resentment. Everything points the other way. If, as it is said, faith is paranoia in reverse, paranoia is a contradiction of faith. After all, perfect fear casts out love. Blaming others or playing the victim can be variously a way of establishing minority identity. A means of seeking security. A form of exercising responsibility, a method of redressing injury, wittingly or unwittingly. Americans and evangelicals have become connoisseurs of grievance. But is it Christian? The answer is an emphatic, *No*. Followers of Christ will be called many names, but our only identity comes from the One whose call reveals our names and natures. Followers of Christ may no more like shouldering the cost of their commitments than followers of other ways. But no one who knows what our Master bore can bear to shrug off the blame on others. In reality the brotherhood of victimized ones is a twisted counterfeit of the fellowship of the Crucified One. Followers of Christ flinch at times from the pain of wounds and smart at slights. But the cost is the contract of the way of the cross. No child of the sovereign God, whom we can call our Father, is ever a victim or in a minority. Trust in the utter dependability of God is the antidote to fear, just as forgiveness is the antidote to resentment. Vengeance is God's, not ours. But having counted the cost, our commitment is to take up the cross daily and follow Jesus. Such commitment is not only to be His, entirely His, and forever His, but at all costs His. When we have to follow Him outside the camp of those who are respected, then we will know the call of Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he wrote, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.'

In the end [Guinness writes] it is the fact of the cross that makes our present evangelical blaming and victim playing so utterly blasphemous. Shame on us for our thin skins and our petty sensitivities. And beyond the cross is another fact that makes such grievances insignificant, too. In a short while our final glory will make every pain inconsequential. As John Donne, a great Christian poet from the 17<sup>th</sup> century wrote, "But then there is *pondous gloriea*, an exceeding weight of eternal glory, and that turns the scales. For as it makes all worldly prosperity as dung, so it makes all the worldly adversity as feathers."

We are not a tribe of the discontent. Those who profess Christ are not a minority. We are not victims. We are children of the King, and our testimony is that our Savior died for the forgiveness of sins. Our sins. He bore our sin. He bore the wrath of God that we might be set free. But then He went to the grave, and on the third day He rose again victorious over sin and death, victorious over every authority. And every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And anyone who calls on His name---brothers and sisters, if you are a Christian---if you call on His name, then we have a Lord who is always good. We ought not to be resentful and thin-skinned, but gracious and praying.

This is heavy, and it convicts my heart, as perhaps it might convict yours. My prayer is that God would give us deep wisdom of what it means to understand God and governance for us in this day and in this year. May God give us tongues of grace, tamed tongues as we speak

to one another and about others and especially those in authority over us, that God may show them mercy and give them grace to be servants for our good. Be they Democrat, be they Republican, or whoever will hold office, may we be found a people who are prayerful and humbled under Christ the King. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we want to thank You this morning for the work of Christ. We acknowledge Him as our Lord and our King. We confess to You, oh Lord, that we too often have invested our earthly politics with an idolatrous energy in hopes that our politics could make us feel better and more valued. Forgive us, oh Lord. Forgive us for our crude jokes, our disrespectful words, and forgive us for playing in the politics of grievance and tribalism. I pray, oh Lord, this morning not only for forgiveness, I pray that you would make us a people who are prayerful, but also respectful, because they serve under You, but over us. And we pray this morning for our president, Barack Obama, our vice-president, we pray, Father, for our Congress. We pray, Lord, for the Supreme Court. We pray, Lord, for all the governors of states, mayors, police, firemen, firewomen, our military, everyone who is over authority on us and who serve for our good. Oh Lord, give us grace. Give them grace to execute justice, to punish the evil-doer, and to care for citizens, which is their charge. We give You thanks that You have enabled us to live here. Now give us grace to follow Christ as we live here. In Jesus' name, Amen.