

Romans 13:1-7  
October 29, 2023

Believe it or not, Thanksgiving is less than a month away. It's that special time of the year when family gets together. Maybe that's exciting to you, maybe it's not- because sometimes our family members can be opinionated, brash, abrasive, and a little too willing to break that rule that my family, and maybe yours, has in place: "No religion or politics at the dinner table."

As one of those who are brash, opinionated, abrasive family members, I understand why this rule is in place. Thanksgiving dinner isn't an appropriate time to argue about politics. What about the pulpit? Obviously pastors talk about religion while they preach, but should pastors talk about government in Church? Jesus does. Paul does. The OT prophets do. As a pastor who is called to preach God's Word to you, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't tell you what the Bible says about government, even if it is a sticky, contentious topic. So, let's dig into what God's Word says about government, and apply it to ourselves. The main message that Paul is getting across to us is this: **They're God's Servants Too.**

*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.*

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is one of the most well-known in Scripture. It's his longest letter, lasting 16 chapters, and if you had to choose one book that summarizes the entirety of Christian teaching, Romans would be one of the best options. It's in Romans that Paul goes into the greatest detail of the fallen nature of all human beings, and how through faith in Jesus' sacrifice we are deemed perfect before God, and that the faith we have in Christ is not a work that we muster up in ourselves, but it's actually the result of God choosing us first, choosing to claim us in Baptism and sustaining us in our Christian life through the Word. And then in chapter 12 of Romans, Paul says, "In view of all of God's mercy given to you, live this way. Think this way." Paul then goes into what the response to God's free grace looks like in practical ways, **and in chapter 13, Paul shows that out of thankfulness to God for his mercy, and out of love and trust for him, we submit ourselves to the government.**

You heard me right. Every government official, president, emperor, prime minister, judge, police officer, fireman, mayor, senator, congressman, representative, teacher, employer, whether they know it or not, whether they themselves are Christian or not, are ultimately there because God put them there. And out of loving submission to God himself, we are called to submit ourselves to the authorities that God himself has put over us. To not do so, to rebel against them, to

disrespect them, to break their laws, is to do nothing less than to break God's holy Law, and to bring judgment on yourself- and what's fascinating here is Paul doesn't specify what kind of punishment, earthly or eternal, and he likely means both. To act in rebellion to the authorities God has put over you is to act against him.

*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.*

Consider this: when God wants to bless, provide for, protect, and serve people, he does it through people. And God's goal for you isn't just to get you to Heaven. He loves you and me, and all people, even non-believers, so much, that he has provided means through which they can be protected, sustained, and cared for on earth. The government is one of those means, and the main purpose of this establishment is for punishing evil and rewarding good on an earthly level. I don't know about you, but I actually like living in a country where the speed limit is typically enforced, and people drive on the correct side of the road, and people are generally punished for murder and theft. Can you imagine what your life would be like if the government didn't punish anyone for anything? None of us would be safe. The government is God's way of protecting and sustaining you from earthly evil, and to reward those who do good.

**Therefore, they are God's servants too.** What we are talking about is what Luther called the "Doctrine of Two Kingdoms." God has two kingdoms, two institutions through which he blesses, sustains, and loves people. The first "kingdom" is what the bible describes as "the Kingdom of Heaven." It's the Church- believers. Through his Church, God saves people from hell and Satan through the Gospel proclaimed in the Word and the sacraments. His other kingdom is the government- and through this kingdom, he protects and cares not necessarily for the soul, but the body, and gives that kingdom the responsibility to protect and give justice to evil and reward good. As Christians, we are citizens in two kingdoms. We are citizens of God's eternal kingdom, which he uses to care for our souls, and we are members of God's earthly kingdom, our government, which cares for our bodies. Both are good. Both are necessary. One is eternal, one is temporary, but both are institutions of God himself, and the leaders in these kingdoms are both God's servants. In the Kingdom of heaven, God blesses you through deeply flawed, broken men like myself. In the Earthly kingdom, God blesses you through deeply flawed, broken people as well. As citizens of God's kingdom, God calls us to be productive, obedient, law-abiding citizens of this earthly kingdom.

*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.*

Because we have been made children of God through God's grace, **because we are heirs of his salvation through Jesus' sacrifice and members of his eternal kingdom, it is, according to Paul necessary to submit to the government** not simply because we don't get to get speeding tickets or jail time, but because our loving God tells us to, and we love him, so we want to. Therefore, we pay what we owe to God, and pay what we owe to the government. We pay our taxes because they are God's servants, whether they know it or not, that bless us with their leadership. And in verse 7, the word "give" actually in Greek is "Give back." **In the same way that we are giving back to God when we give our offerings to church, we are giving back to our government what they are owed when we pay them taxes and revenue, but also respect and honor, and when we do that, we are showing our trust in God.**

Those are the basic principles that Paul is laying out for us, and I'm sure you have some questions. I'd like to take the rest of the sermon to talk about how these principles play out in our lives.

*What if the government is bad?*

Paul is very clear about the purpose of government, to punish evil and protect good, and that's done in many ways. But what happens when officials are corrupt and they reward evil and punish good? Do we still have to submit to them? **Yes.** This is a hard teaching, and has been for 2000 years- especially because we modern Americans are societal descendants of the founding fathers who rejected this biblical teaching when they founded our country and rebelled against their government- England. First, consider Paul's situation and the context of his audience- this was hard teaching for them as well. The people reading this letter are in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, and at this time, the emperor is Nero. Nero's rise to power was not in any way moral- the reason he became emperor was because his mother married the last one, and then killed him. Nero was a deranged monster, and he was much less moral or sane than any of our elected officials. And yet, Paul calls the Romans to submit themselves to his authority because God allowed him to be put there. **Just because the government or its leaders are corrupt doesn't mean that we are allowed to dishonor or disrespect them. God in his wisdom has put them in power.**

Respect, however, does not mean "unconditional obedience" or "worship." That belongs to God alone. In some instances, rulers and leaders have commanded Christians to do things that God specifically commands them not to do, and to not do things that God specifically commands them to do. In Paul's case, the Roman empire made it law that they had to worship the emperor as their Savior, and the Christians had to respectfully disobey. The Jewish rulers in Jerusalem commanded the disciples in Acts to stop preaching about Jesus, and they replied, "We must obey God rather than men." In cases like this, disobedience can happen, and whatever punishment happens as a result is something that Christians face with poise and courage. Consider Daniel

and his friends. They obeyed the government and studied and excelled as the king's advisors, even though he was subjugating their people, but didn't break the Old Testament food laws, and were willing to deal with the consequences. But unless that happens, submission to God means submission to the authorities that are over us, even if we personally don't agree with them or approve of their character. Consider this quote by an early church Father named Origen:

*“Nobody will deny that our senses- sight, sound, and thought- are given to us by God. But although we get them from God, what we do with them is up to us. God will judge us righteously for having abused what he gave us to use for good. Likewise, God’s judgment against the authorities will be just, if they have used their powers they have received according to their own ungodliness and not according to the laws of God.”*

Of course there are bad governments and bad leaders. There have been horrible, tyrannical governments in the history of the world, bad police officers who abuse their power, dirty politicians, biased judges, and if you think you're angry about it, how angry do you think God is, the one who gave them that power? Let him take vengeance. Every person who abuses the power God gives them is going to have to answer to him, and it won't be pretty. As for now, we show our trust in his goodness by submitting ourselves to authority.

2. Which brings me to my next, and final point. **We need to be very careful about how we speak of our elected officials.** The words “not my president” and “let’s go Brandon” have absolutely no business being on our lips or our social media pages. The “Biden for prison” signs have absolutely no business being on our lawns. You don't have to agree with the policies or approve of their behavior. In fact, as Christians, there are times when you definitely shouldn't. But you must respect them, pray for them, and thank God for the good that he does through them. Read the Scriptures and see that **God has a way of blessing his people through deeply flawed leaders.** God used Nebuchadnezzar during Daniel's time to call his people to repentance for their sins. God used the Roman officials to give Paul safe passage when the Jewish zealots wanted to kill him, and eventually when the Roman government put him to death and persecuted Christians, that's when Christianity spread the fastest! Good government and bad, they are God's servant for your good, even if they don't know it. And if you're really struggling with this, which I wouldn't blame you for, I want you to consider this: If God is so good, so loving, so on your side, that he would willingly die to make you his, and so powerful that through the most grievous governmental injustice, the execution of God's perfect Son, he could do something beautiful, **then isn't God good and powerful enough that he can do good things through deeply flawed leaders?** Of course he is. And if he is the King of all Kings, and you belong to him, then we can submit to the lesser kings, just for now, until *the* King returns. Amen.