

The Church and Government, Part 2 --- Romans 13:1-7

November 15, 2020

Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3For 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; 4for it is a servant 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 servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. 6For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7Pay to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

Introduction

Our text this morning focuses our attention on the relationship between the Church and government. A few years ago, a man flew his plane into an IRS building in Texas causing massive damage because he was disgruntled with the whole government system, particularly the tax system. Before committing this suicidal act, he set his house on fire and posted a six-page anti-government discourse on a website. He wrote, "I would only hope that people wake up and begin to see the pompous political thugs and their mindless followers for what they are." He goes on to write, "Violence not only is the answer, it is the only answer."

This man had his own answer for his disagreement with how government functions: violence is the answer when you are at odds with the government. I can tell you unequivocally, violence is not God's answer concerning how to relate to government, even governments that are evil. The question arises for Christians—what is the correct response to government when that government fails to perform its function or is antagonistic to God and His Church?

In recent years the whole subject of government has taken a much more prominent position in the American culture. When I was a boy, I could remember the whole Vietnam War controversy. That war was never popular. My oldest brother fought in the Vietnam War, so it had personal ramifications to our family.

There was a lot of opposition to that war and some men even left the country to avoid the draft. Many people resented those whom they considered “deserters, or draft dodgers.” In fact, I think one of our recent presidents was involved in suspicious draft dodging activity during the Vietnam Era.

Christians responded in a variety of ways to issues surrounding the Vietnam War. Some were pacifists. They were against the war. Some were supportive of the war claiming the government has a right to wage war and people must obey and support the government.

Beyond the Vietnam War there have been numerous other controversial government situations since then; such as Watergate during the Nixon administration, Clinton’s affair with a young woman and subsequent lying while in office, and even the issue of government involvement in the health care system. When the government shows itself immoral and/or inept in its governing, a variety of questions arise concerning how a Christian is to relate to the government.

Do Christians have duties towards ungodly governments? For example, should we pay taxes if we know that our tax money will be used for godless or immoral ends? Suppose the commands of God and the commands of human government disagree? In this case, do we obey government in those circumstances believing that God has set government over us and will therefore take care of the consequences of our actions? What is the biblical, Christian view of human government?

These questions have been important to Christians throughout the history of the Church, but I believe these questions are particularly pertinent to us today. We are under a government that seems progressively aggressive in taking hostile steps against the biblical influence that has been woven in the fabric of the United States. We find ourselves asking questions concerning our relationship to human government.

When the government begins to censor and make laws against what the Bible teaches concerning a variety of issues like homosexuality or abortion, what is to be our response? Is violence the only answer like this poor, disgruntled man thought?

Fortunately, we are not left out in the cold concerning what we are to think or how we are to act in regards to government whether it is sympathetic to believers or hostile. The Bible gives us clear teaching concerning how God and government relate.

Our passage this morning is a pivotal passage in all of Scripture concerning the relationship between the Church and government. In our last study, I began to give you an overview of biblical teaching concerning government. We saw that God commands the Church to submit to government . . . plain and simple. The Church must wisely and respectfully interact with government so as not to portray the Church as an organization that threatens government. Especially within a democracy where we have freedoms of political expression, we must maintain an attitude of submission and respect.

We considered that the starting point of Paul's argument is found in the reason he gives for this all-encompassing opening statement that "everyone," not only Christians, "must submit himself to the governing authorities." Why? The answer is not that you will get into trouble if you don't; or even that obedience is necessary for maintaining social order. Those are excellent practical reasons that Paul understands and will bring into the discussion later, but they are not the reasons he gives at the beginning. What he says in verse 1 is that we must obey the authorities because "*there is no authority except that which God has established*" and "*the authorities that exist have been established by God.*"

In other words, the starting point for Paul's argument is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God (in this case in regard to human rulers). God is sovereign. Therefore, those who exercise authority do so because God has established them in their positions.

We considered that we speak often today of the separation of church and state, and we should be thankful for that separation. It is a liberty to have a church free from government interference or control; and vice versa, to have a state free from a pope-like domination. But the separation of church and state does not mean the separation of God and state. God is the source of authority that government exercises.

The Church and Government, Part 2

This morning I want to continue to give you an overview of what the Bible teaches about the relationship between church and state before we get into our text. Like last week, you will not find an outline for this morning. I want to simply give you a summary of Biblical teaching on this matter.

I believe the Church could easily be caught off guard in America if the government were to suddenly pass laws that mandate suppression and even penalties against preaching certain truths found in the Bible. We must consider beforehand what the Biblical response is to be towards a government that

aggressively seeks to persecute the Christian faith. We should not be confused in our thinking and actions if even our United States government takes steps to curtail our religious freedoms.

Review

In our last study, we considered a statement made by Christ to Pilate during the trial of Christ that I want to further investigate. John 19:10-11 says, *“Pilate said to Jesus, “. . . Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” Jesus answered Pilate, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above”*

Jesus had previously informed Pilate that Jesus is a king and that His kingdom was not of this earthly realm. Pilate assumed that whatever Jesus was talking about was not his affair and it did not concern him. Now, in verse 19, Pilate finds that Jesus’ kingdom has everything to do with him and his own authority to govern.

Jesus corrects the wrong idea that Pilate has some kind of inherent authority over Jesus. Pilate has no intrinsic authority over Jesus but only that authority which is granted to him from God. Jesus is declaring that God is over all and that an earthly governor can only exercise authority as God permits.

The bottom line here is that Jesus states that authority on this earth is a delegated authority. The source of authority is God Himself who gives authority to whom He desires on earth. We saw in our last study that God uses even evil governments to accomplish His will. God used Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Nero to accomplish His designs.

When we know this, we begin to understand that Jesus was not only acknowledging and affirming the authority of Pilate; but further than that Jesus was stating since God is the source of human government, government is to be highly respected. This has tremendous consequence for Christians and how they relate to government.

One application at this point is that revolution (“I would rather be king than you, so I will overthrow you” or violence against the government) is against what the Bible teaches. We are to honor, respect, and be thankful for those in authority. Our text this morning from Romans 13:1-2 says, *“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will*

receive condemnation upon themselves.”

It is clear that governments reflect the ultimate authority of God, and God delegates authority to whomever He chooses. So we can glean from Jesus' declaration and from Paul's clear teaching in Romans that we are to be subject to those in authority in government. Christians should be model citizens. Unfortunately, there have been cases where Christians disrespect authority and this leads to a low view in regards to obeying authority.

Calvin wrote that obedience must be given even to wicked rulers. He wrote, "We are not only subject to the authority of princes who perform their office toward us uprightly and faithfully as they ought, but also the authority of all who by whatever means, have control of affairs, even though they perform poorly."

This raises the question, are there limits? Suppose the king is a very wicked king, or the president is a very wicked president. Are all commands from such a ruler legitimate or are there situations in which a Christian disobeys? The answer is that there are limits.

We must be careful to give every possible opportunity for obedience to those in authority. However, we must do nothing contrary to the express commands of God in Scripture even though a law is made that directly contradicts God's directives.

For example, one limit the Bible places on obedience to human authority concerns the preaching of the Gospel. Proclaiming the Gospel is a Christian's duty based upon the explicit command of Christ. Matthew 28:19-20 commands, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

In the book of Acts, we find that Peter and John were commanded by those in government not to preach the Gospel. The disciples had been preaching and doing miracles, and they had created such a stir that they were called before a council of elders in Jerusalem. The authorities examined Peter and John and then told them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. We find Peter and John's response in Acts 4:18-20, *"And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19But Peter and John answered and said to them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.' "*

Even though the apostles were threatened in connection with this command, they went back to their preaching. When the authorities heard of it and learned that they were again back in the temple area teaching the people, they sent guards to bring them before the council.

Acts 5:28-32 We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. 29But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. 31He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Notice that Peter and John did not call Christians to gather swords to overthrow the Sanhedrin. They simply took the consequences for their civil disobedience which, in their case, was a flogging. Furthermore, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ.

So, we find that Christians are to give precedent to the preaching of the Gospel and are not to cease from it even though commanded to stop by the civil authorities. At the same time, we must be willing to suffer the consequences of our purposed disobedience whether they are fines, imprisonment, or even death . . . as has been the case in church history.

A second limit the Bible places on obedience to human authorities concerns conduct and morals. For example, the Bible clearly teaches against homosexuality, murder (whether it be in the womb or euthanasia), lying and other such moral restrictions. No government has the right to command Christians to perform an immoral or non-Christian act or to stop speaking against such immorality.

Again, at the point that a government would expressly make laws that command immoral acts or go against the clear teaching of Scripture, Christians must obey God rather than man.

There are a variety of examples in the Bible of measured disobedience to government for the sake of obeying God. For example, during the time of Moses when the Pharaoh ordered the Jewish midwives to kill all male babies when they were born, they disobeyed Pharaoh's order and allowed them to live. Those women understood that murdering was wrong and against God. God honored their civil disobedience by blessing their homes.

When four young Jewish men (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego) were commanded to eat meat and drink wine in Babylon, they respectfully refused because they would have defiled themselves by breaking the Mosaic dietary laws. As you follow the story, you will find that even while refusing to do what God had forbidden, they showed respect for the human authority which they had disobeyed.

Two other familiar accounts of civil disobedience also have to do with these four men. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego disobeyed the king's command to worship the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar. They were willing to accept the consequence for their civil disobedience which was to be thrown into a fiery furnace.

Likewise Daniel respectfully, but firmly, disobeyed the king's decree that no one could pray to any other deity except for the king. Daniel also was willing to accept the consequences for his disobedience which was to be thrown into the lions' den. It is important to note Daniel's lack of spite and his genuine respect for the human authority.

There is an important difference on the one hand between disobeying government because of obedience towards God, and on the other hand forcefully overthrowing a government by blood shed. I am not saying that we must obey every law of government. But that does not imply that we have the right to take up arms against government.

What is true for the individual believer is true for the Church as a whole. A local church is obligated to observe civil laws such as zoning, building codes, fire safety regulations, and every other law and regulation that would not cause them to disobey God's Word. A church is only justified in disobeying a law, for example, if it would require acceptance of homosexuals into church membership or of hiring them to work on staff.

May I also add that persecution is not a cause for rebellion. Jesus warned numerous times that His followers would be persecuted. He even warned that many would be put to death and hated on account of the name of Jesus, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

A Christian should not seek persecution. A Christian is free to escape persecution when possible. But just because a government seeks to persecute Christians, does not mean that we have the right to forcefully overthrow that government. There were circumstances in the early Church where believers allowed the seizure of their property without warring against the government.

Hebrews 10:32-34 *But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.*

Every Christian, no matter what form of government he lives under, is under command from the Lord to submit to that government for the sake of leading a peaceful life and having an effective witness. Jesus makes clear that authority is given by God and therefore believers must submit to the authority of government.

Unfortunately, Christians have been involved in the forceful overthrow of oppressive governments. If it were God's will for the Church to take up arms against those who persecute Christians, there would have been abundant opportunity for such guidelines to be articulated in Scripture.

I am going to say something that may be hard for some of you to hear, but I believe I can support it biblically. Many churches believe that the American Revolution was fully justified biblically. They believe that there is a God-given right to pursue freedom and happiness and that attaining these things and defending them is somehow part of biblical Christianity. Whatever cost to get freedom and happiness is justified including armed rebellion and bloodshed when necessary.

There are portions of the American Revolution that were obviously against the clear teaching of Scripture. Armed revolt against government is forbidden by God. That does not mean that, in His grace, God has not given great blessing to America. His blessings have been in spite of the disobedience to His Word which was involved in the revolution bringing the nation into being.

Jesus did not call for revolt against Pilate or the Sanhedrin in response to their misuses of authority. We may be entering into a time of our history that the government misuses their authority to subvert Christians. However, we do not have the right to take up arms in order to topple the government. We may respectfully disobey the unbiblical laws that may be passed; nonetheless, we are not told to go into armed revolt.

In fact, Jesus said in John 18:36, *"My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would*

not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”

There is coming a time when Christ will rule this realm directly. He will come and establish His kingdom. There will be bloodshed and His subjects will fight. This realm rightfully belongs to Him. He has allowed a usurper to rule for a time; however, Christ Himself will be king here on earth—just not right now. Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this realm. That is why His followers were not fighting. Our response to bad government is not violence. We do not further the kingdom of God through bloodshed. Human government is a minister of God.

Conclusion

I want to draw some applications from what has been said this far.

The relationship between the Church and government have important ramifications concerning the purpose of the Church. Is the primary purpose of the Church to change society, culture and government? Or is the focus of the Church on evangelism, making disciples and growing the Church?

Some pastors and Christian leaders have turned from emphasizing the Gospel to emphasizing politics—from emphasizing the Word of God to emphasizing coalitions to “impact culture.” Is the Church to devote herself to trying to bring people better morality or bringing them the Gospel?

I agree with one prominent pastor when he says, “It really does not matter whether people go to hell as policemen or prostitutes, judges or criminals, pro-life or pro-abortion The mission of the Church is not to change society—although that is often a beneficial by-product of faithful ministry and living—but the mission of the church is to worship and serve the Lord and to bring others to saving faith in Him.” end quote

It is not that Christians are not to be involved, even at times directly, in civil government. It is certainly not that believers should avoid expressing their beliefs through voting for the best qualified political candidates and for sound legislation. That is part of doing good in our society.

There are examples of God’s men who have held prominent positions in government and have been God’s blessings to that government. I think of Joseph in Egypt who saved the lives of countless thousands of people as he was second in command in all of Egypt. Daniel held a prominent position in the government of Babylon and was a righteous influence in a number of situations

in the book of Daniel.

We should be grateful for and take advantage of our many legal avenues for changing bad laws and bad government. But that has nothing to do with the Christian's charge or task of proclaiming the Gospel and living a holy life to demonstrate the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Particularly in America, we should be grateful to God for freedom to worship, to preach and teach the Gospel, and to live our lives almost without restriction. That is a great privilege, but it is not necessary to the effectiveness of the Gospel truth or to spiritual growth.

Most Jews in Jesus' day believed that the Messiah would come as a political deliverer. Many of Jesus' disciples expected Him to free them from the Roman yoke. But Jesus made no call for political or social reform, even by peaceful means. He never attempted to capture the culture for biblical morality or to gain greater freedom.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. Jesus declared in no uncertain terms to *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."* Believers are to be model citizens known as law abiding not rabble-rousing, obedient rather than rebellious, respectful of government rather than ridiculing. We must speak against sin, against injustice, against immorality and ungodliness.

But we must do it within the framework of civil law and with respect for civil authorities. We are to be a godly people, doing good and living peaceably within an ungodly society, showing our transformed lives so that the saving power of God is seen clearly.

Paul gives no qualification or condition for believers to be in subjection to governing authorities in Romans 13. Every civil authority is to be submitted to willingly. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul teaches, *"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."* (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

The command to be subject to government is more significant when you consider the context in which this command was given. You recall that Nero was the emperor at this time and had already set fire to Rome and blamed Christians for doing so. So Paul is calling for the Christians at that time to pray for and submit to a despotic, Christian hating emperor.

Titus 3:1 *Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed.*

We see that there are no exceptions related to the rulers' competence or incompetence, morality or immorality, cruelty or kindness. Regardless of the failures of government whether they are immoral, unjust and ungodly, Christians are to pray for those in leadership and live peaceful lives that influence the world by godly, selfless living, not by rebellion and armed revolt.

In fact, there are ways that believers are able to benefit from government. For example, it is not wrong for Christians to look to their governments for protection of life and property. Paul took advantage of the government's role in promoting what is good when he used his Roman citizenship to secure justice by appealing to Caesar.

In America, we have the freedom to take political action to change laws and to appeal to our constitutional rights. We have that freedom. However, if government were to take a turn toward persecution of believers, that does not give us the right create a Christian army and to forcefully overthrow the American government.

The ultimate judge of history is God Himself. The standard for judging the biblical correctness of an action is not our subjective opinion but God's objective truth. We are always to subject ourselves to government at all times except when the commands or actions of government would cause us to violate the clear teachings of Scripture.