

WHO NEEDS THE GOVERNMENT?

ROMANS 13:1-7

I admit it. I get a kind of perverse enjoyment out of when politicians make fun of each other. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War 2, once described a fellow member of Parliament as “one of those orators who, before they get up, do not know that they are going to say; when they are speaking, do not know what they are saying; and when they have sat down, do not know what they have said.” That description might fit our current presidential candidates pretty well, too, come to think of it! It’s very easy to develop a kind of contemptuous, cynical attitude towards our government and dismiss every politician as a bumbling fool or money-grubbing crook. I’ll be the first to agree with you that our government – like all human governments – is fully capable of doing some dumb stuff.

But on this Sunday just before Independence Day, I thought it would be timely to remind you and me that contempt for the government isn’t an acceptable option for disciples of Jesus. It just isn’t! God’s Word reminds us that God has a plan and purpose for human government. As His people, we ought to be the first to respect God’s plan, recognize God’s purpose, and remember God’s intended role for any and all human governance. Now, why did the Christian leader, Paul, put this section into his letter to fellow disciples of Jesus living in the city of Rome? Yes, he wanted to underline to anybody and everybody that Christians were no political threat to the Roman Empire. I also believe Paul wanted to remind those Roman Christians that part of their mission field was governmental leaders. God’s love reaches out beyond our own families, beyond our church friends, beyond our neighbors, beyond people we work with or go to school with to include even those who lead and represent us politically. I see Paul answering two questions in those verse we just read.

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT SUPPOSED TO BE?

Verses 1-3 answer that question pretty clearly. You hear it in phrases like “those in positions of authority have been placed there by God” and “anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.” We believe God is the Creator of individual human beings. But this passage tells us that He’s also created or established certain structures or institutions to benefit human beings. One example is the family. It’s a structure created and established by God for our good. So is the local church – it’s an entity or an institution created and established by God to promote the good news about Jesus throughout a specific neighborhood or community.

It may be hard to stomach, but on the basis of the Scripture we read, it’s clear that human government is a divine structure or institution created by God and granted a kind of authority by none other than God Himself. That same assumption turns up in other places in the Bible, too. “Remind the believers to submit to the government and its officers. They should be obedient, always ready to do what is good.” (Titus 3:1 NLT) “For the Lord’s sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right.” (1 Pt 2:13-14 NLT)

As much as possible, followers of Jesus are called to submit to and cooperate with the government that we live under. To rebel against a government is to rebel against God Himself since God has established human government for a positive purpose in this world. Now, I'm sure some of you are already thinking to yourselves, "OK, but aren't there exceptions? Has God really established or sanctioned every government past and present? What about evil, wicked Roman Emperors like Caligula, Nero, and Domitian in the time of Paul himself? What about the American revolution against British rule we celebrate tomorrow? What about past tyrants like Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein or current ones like the leader of North Korea? What if we lived under any of those governments? Is it God's will to submit willingly to that kind of authority?"

Paul was presenting in Romans 13 the divine ideal of human government not necessarily the human reality in every case. Remember that he was very well acquainted with evil and tyrannical government actions. I don't believe his intent here is to address how followers of Jesus are supposed to respond to every last government in every possible situation. But this is the right place to start. Whenever we try to articulate the relationship of God to human government, this is where we should begin the discussion. God indeed has a good, legitimate purpose for human governments.

The Bible also clearly teaches that human governments and its leaders have limits. Years ago, Christian Herter served as the governor of Massachusetts. He was in the midst of a campaign for a second term. One day after a busy schedule and no time for lunch, he arrived at a church barbecue event utterly famished. As he moved down the serving line, Gov. Herter held out his plate to the woman serving the chicken. She put one piece of chicken on his plate. "Excuse me," said the governor. "You mind if I have two pieces of chicken?" "I'm sorry," the woman replied. "I'm only supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." Now Gov. Herter was really hungry, so he decided to throw his weight around. "Lady, do you know what I am? I'm the governor of this state!" The woman looked him the eye and answered, "Do you know who I am? I'm the lady in charge of the chicken!"

Of course human authority has its limits. The only supreme authority is God Himself. As you read the Bible, a very clear principles emerges. We are to be subject to the government we live under right up to the point where obedience to the state requires disobedience to God. That's where Christians draw the line. If the state ever commands us to do what God forbids or the state forbids us to do something God commands, then a choice must be made. Sure, there are times when followers of Jesus must disobey the government they live under so that they can obey God first.

Consider a few examples. We just finished a study of Moses. Do you remember how the Egyptian Pharaoh ordered every male Jewish child to be killed at birth? Moses' parents defied that order and saved Moses' life because Pharaoh commanded them to do something God forbids. When the Sanhedrin – the Jewish governing council at the time of Jesus – forbade the first Christians from preaching and teaching in Jesus' name, Peter (another Christian leader) said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5:29 NLT) History reveals that a few years after Paul died, a terrible

government-sanctioned persecution broke out against the first Christians because they refused to worship Caesar as a god. During World War 2, some Christians defied their Nazi rulers and hid Jewish people in their own homes. Some of them paid the ultimate price for their defiance by dying in concentration camps along with Jews. So, yes, of course there are limits to the authority of any human government. But, as God's people, let's not make the exception the rule. God says most of the time human governments have the right to put legitimate demands and expectations upon us. Paul also seems to answer a second question in our Scripture passage today.

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT SUPPOSED TO DO?

That's answered in v. 4-7 of Romans 13. You start to get the idea when you read phrases like, "The authorities are God's servants sent for your good.... They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.... They are serving God in what they do." Again, God has created and established structures or institutions to help human beings. Every structure or institution God creates has a ministry. The family has a ministry. The local church has a ministry. I know it sounds odd, but even the government has a ministry established by God Himself.

Like what? The government has the God-given ministry of protecting its citizens. A fundamental purpose of the government is to protect us from attack by providing an adequate defense. The government also exists to protect us from criminals. Our passage said, "They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong." (Rom 13:4 NLT) We're not supposed to take the law into our own hands because God has explicitly given the government under which we live that responsibility. The state bears the sword, so to speak, not you or me. When it punishes those who do what's evil or wrong, it fulfills part of its God-given ministry.

The government also has the God-given ministry to benefit your life. Our passage said, "The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good." (Rom 13:4 NLT) We will debate the proper role of the government in our lives until Jesus comes back! Some people believe government should have a really big role in almost every area of your life and mine. Others believe the less government the better. But whether you consider yourself a liberal, a conservative, a progressive, a libertarian, a Democrat, a Republican, or an independent, you should be able to grant the truth that the government can and should have a positive, God-given role in your life. There are some services – some benefits – that the government must and is best equipped to provide. It's part and parcel of its God-given ministry to benefit your life and mine.

Paul even mentions the thorny issue of paying taxes in our text today. He makes it clear that, as followers of Jesus, we don't just pay taxes because the government will put us in jail if we don't. That's not a good enough reason for a Christian! Because we recognize that the government has a God-given ministry, we pay our taxes as an act of obedience to God. It's not just because we're afraid of the IRS! But doesn't the government waste extravagant amounts of our tax dollars? Of course, it does! And I support those who want to reduce taxes or make them fairer proportionately. At the

same time, whenever I pay my taxes this Scripture encourages me to have the following attitude: “Lord, I pay these taxes as an act of obedience to You. It’s one way I recognize and acknowledge what You have created and established for my benefit.”

Do you owe our government anything? If you’re a follower of Jesus, you owe it love. How can you love the government? You submit to it and cooperate with it unless it clearly goes against God’s commands. You pray for its leaders. Paul doesn’t mention prayer in Romans 13, but he does in another letter to his friend, Timothy. “I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior.” (1 Timothy 2:1-3 NLT)

This weekend and tomorrow we celebrate the fact we live in a free, democratic country. Of course, it’s not perfect and it never will be. But we do have the opportunity to influence our government in ways many people in the world don’t. Vote, Christian! It’s one way you love God and the government He has established. I hope you educate yourself on the social, moral, and political issues of the day and let your voice be heard in a responsible, respectful, and civil way. That’s yet another way we love God and the government we live under. And from time to time, God will even give followers of Jesus the opportunity to provide the benefits of government to us. Or, better yet, God might give you the opportunity to lead the kind of change that honors God and helps people.

That’s what happened to a man named Telemachus. He was a hermit who lived in a remote village. He spent his days praying and tending his garden. One day, he thought he heard God telling him to go to the city of Rome, so he obeyed and set out on foot. He arrived in Rome at the time of a great festival. Telemachus followed a crowd of people heading for the Colosseum. He saw the gladiators stand before the Emperor and say, “We who are about die salute you.” But then he realized these men were going to fight to the death as entertainment. He cried out, “In the name of Christ, stop!” Everyone ignored Telemachus. When the games began, he pushed his way through the crowd, climbed over the wall, and dropped to the floor of the great arena. When the crowd saw this little man hurrying over to the gladiators shouting “In the name of Christ, stop”, they just thought it was a part of the show. They laughed at Telemachus and then they got angry with him. Some say that as Telemachus pleaded with the gladiators to stop killing each other, one of them stabbed him with his sword. Others say the crowd stoned him. As Telemachus was dying, his last words were “In the name of Christ, stop!” Then a strange thing happened. The gladiators stood there looking at this little, dead man. A hush fell over the entire Colosseum. Way up in one of the upper rows, a man stood and made his way to an exit. Soon others began to follow him. Everyone left the Colosseum that day in silence. The year was 391 AD. That was the last battle to the death between gladiators in the Colosseum. Never again in that great stadium did men kill each other to entertain a crowd. Why? Because a follower of Jesus stood up and said stop. One voice – one life – spoke the truth in God’s Name. That’s what we’re called to do: keep on speaking God’s truth to our government and to our culture even if people don’t listen - and until they do listen - to the glory of God.