

“The Authorities Are God’s Servants”

Sermons on Romans # 32

Texts: Romans 13:1-7; Daniel 2:19-38

In Romans 12, Paul exhorts Christians in the church of Rome to be renewed in their thinking and to avoid being conformed to the pattern of this world. Thinking like a Christian is the outworking in everyday life of that righteous status we have been given through faith in Jesus Christ. Because Christians are not to think like pagans, Paul tells the Romans that they are to regard others more highly than themselves. They are to live in peace with those outside the church, even in the face of increasing persecution from the Roman authorities. And it is this latter exhortation from Paul which raises the question, “how are Christians to relate to civil government?” especially a government which is centered in the worship of its emperor.

Thus in Romans 13, Paul turns his attention to this very important topic. For obvious reasons, these seven verses have exercised a tremendous influence upon Christian political theory throughout the ages. As is the case with many of these profound discourses in Paul’s letters, this section of Romans is the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate. Some of the debate centers on the question as to how this particular section of Romans relates to the preceding, especially given Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:19 that Christians are to refrain from taking revenge upon our enemies. Does Paul introduce the discussion of the state at this point because he views the state as the divinely-appointed avenger of the oppressed and downtrodden? Or, does this discussion continue Paul’s line of thinking as to how non-Christians are to relate to those outside the church, but who are now persecuting the church?

Another reason debate arises about this section of Romans is due to the Old Testament background as to how the people of Israel were to relate to the pagan kings around them. Jews viewed all Gentile nations in light of Israel’s divinely appointed mission—Israel was God’s chosen nation and the object of God’s care and affection. And then we must also consider the political situation in Rome when Paul writes this letter, because we cannot understand Paul’s comments without some knowledge of those circumstances that the Christians in Rome were actually facing.

As for the Old Testament background to Paul’s discussion of the Christian’s relationship to the state, there are two points we need to consider. The first is that as God’s chosen covenant community, the nation of Israel was not to submit to any pagan king. In Deuteronomy 17:15, we read “*be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite.*” Israel’s king must be a Jew. Thus it would be very difficult for Jewish converts to Christianity to adopt a Christian view of state, especially now that Israel’s role as God’s divinely chosen nation had come to an end with the dawn of the messianic age. Israel’s national purposes were now fulfilled, even if God’s purposes for the Jews as a people are not. There is no more role for Israel as a nation during the future course of redemptive history. This would be a difficult thing for Jews to accept.

The second point relates to the providence of God. The Jews knew the Old Testament teaching that all rulers rule only because God raises them up according to his sovereign purposes. This is part of common grace in that God uses such kings—even Gentile kings of pagan nations—to bring peace and order to society. In Proverbs 8:15 it is written, “*By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just.*” In Daniel 2:21, our Old Testament lesson, we read that God “*changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and*

deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.” In verses 37-38, Daniel goes on to say to Nebuchadnezzar the ruler of Babylon, “*You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.*” No matter how powerful they think they may be, kings rule only at the pleasure of God. God raises up pagan empires to fulfill his purposes.

As the covenant community, Israel was not to take for itself a Gentile king (much like its people were forbidden from inter-marrying with Gentiles), even though pagan kings were raised up by God according to his providential purposes. Jews could not but help think of their history and the Egyptian Pharaoh, from whose hand God had rescued Israel. It is because of Israel’s unfaithfulness that the nation came under the covenant sanctions, was conquered by the Babylonians and hauled off into captivity, and forced to submit to a Gentile king. It is in this context, that Daniel reminds king Nebuchadnezzar that he rules at the pleasure of Israel’s God even though Nebuchadnezzar holds the people of Israel captive.

Now we jump ahead some six hundred years. At the time Paul writes his letter to the church in Rome in the mid-fifties of the first century, the Roman empire was largely indifferent to Christianity. Throughout the Book of Acts, we read that Paul, a Roman citizen, is able to appeal to Roman authorities to protect him from those Jews who threatened to kill him. But there is also some indication that things were beginning to change. In Acts 18:2, we read that Paul “*met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.*” This is a reference to the famous “edict of Claudius” which was promulgated in AD 50. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, rioting broke out in Rome among the Jews, instigated by a certain “Chrestus.” Most scholars believe this to be a reference to Christian preaching about Jesus Christ in the synagogues. This produced a violent reaction from the Jews, which, in turn, led to rioting. To keep the peace, emperor Claudius ordered all Jews expelled from the city of Rome. But his edict was eased when the rioting ceased and there were many Jews and Christians back in Rome soon thereafter. The Jews in the Roman church would have likely considered Rome to be an evil Gentile nation and if, whenever the emperor felt like it, a persecutor of the Jewish people. Jews would have been very leery of being told to submit to such a government.

It is clear from the gospels that Jesus reaffirmed the Old Testament teaching that God raised up Gentile kings to keep order in civil society. In Mark 12:17, Jesus reaffirms the teaching of Israel’s prophets when he says, “*Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.*” We also read that the Jews were “*amazed at him,*” apparently for affirming Caesar’s validity as ruler over an occupied Israel. Thus Jesus affirms the legitimacy of civil authority—even that of Caesar, a Gentile emperor who would shortly after the time of Jesus begin to assert his own divinity. But Jesus also distinguishes between the two kingdoms, the kingdom of Christ and the civil kingdom, and assigns to each kingdom their particular responsibilities, things earthly and things heavenly. While these two kingdoms should not be confused, as Christians, we are simultaneously members of both kingdoms. Our faith necessarily influences our behavior as citizens of the civil kingdom.

Elsewhere, Paul says much the same as he does here. In 1 Timothy 2:1-3, Paul writes, “*I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior.*” In Titus 3:1, we read “*Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good.*” Like Paul, the apostle Peter affirms the validity of the civil government (1 Peter 2:13-17); “*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every*

authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king." Thus Christians are commanded to be good citizens.

Now, as for the reason as to why Paul addresses this subject in the way in which he does in Romans, the issue is primarily a pastoral one. There are Jews in this church who have converted to Christianity. How can they now be expected to submit to a Gentile king? And a pagan king whom they feared and who has already ordered them out of the city. Gentile Christians faced an entirely different situation. If Rome viewed Christianity as a branch of Judaism, Christians would be offered the same toleration the Roman government gave to Jews. But if Christianity was regarded as a different religion entirely, then what legal protections would Christians now have? And how should Christians view a state which did not grant them official standing?¹ This means that the issue here is not theoretical—"what is the ideal state?"—but practical, "how should Christians in Rome view this pagan empire?"

Paul's answer is to affirm the position taught by Israel's prophets and by Jesus, that civil government is not of human, but of divine origin. Civil government is "established by God" as Paul puts it in verse 1. Furthermore, all governments have been established as servants of God to do "good." This is a very important in understanding Paul's point, because while it places Jewish and Gentile Christians as citizens under the authority of Rome, Paul also stresses that Roman civil authorities are themselves subordinate to God. As one writer puts it—"this gives the ruler a special dignity but at the same time stresses that his position is a subordinate one. He is to do, not whatever he wishes, but what the will of God is for him in his situation."² Thus government is ordained by God for very specific and very limited purposes.

Much of the on-going debate about the authority of the state and justified civil disobedience has to with circumstances where the state (or its leaders) becomes tyrannical and abandons its God-given role or exceeds its divinely-ordained limitations. The most common objection raised to Paul's statement is that Paul is, in effect, requiring Christians to submit to tyranny in every circumstance. But this is not necessarily the case. Paul believes government is ordained by God and therefore, limited by God.

We must also keep in mind the specific situation Paul is addressing with this congregation. Paul is not dealing with the question of what a Christian should do if/when the state (or its ruler) becomes a tyrant. The apostle is not writing a systematic treatise on civil government. Rather, Paul is affirming to Jewish and Gentile believers in the city of Rome that the Roman state is a servant of God, and that it exists, like Babylon and Egypt before it, at the pleasure of God. God has raised up this pagan empire to keep the peace and to provide for the public well-being, i.e., that which Paul calls the "good" in verse 4. Therefore, Christians must see Rome as a legitimate civil authority. This is why Paul calls upon Christians to be good citizens because even the pagan Roman empire is a servant of God, and by being good citizens, Christians will avoid unnecessary persecution.

How is this section related to the preceding? The absence of the usual particles or conjunctions, makes the transition to Romans 13:1 quite abrupt, leading some commentators to believe that Paul is quoting a

¹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 458

² Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 458

secular philosopher, or that this section is stuck here without reference to what goes before or after. But as we have seen, this is not the case. Paul has already made the point in Romans 12:1-2, that Christians are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world (age), and that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we might discern the will of God and live accordingly. Being renewed in mind, in part, entails understanding the proper role of civil government.

Since Paul urges us to reject conformity to this age, some might be tempted to reject the authority of the state as well. No, human government is not part of the new creation, nor will there be civil government the age to come. Although the state in all its forms belongs to “this present evil age” and will one day pass away, nevertheless Paul reminds us that until Christ returns the state does serve a God-ordained ministerial function by restraining evil (with the sword) and promoting the public good. Therefore, Christians must be careful when they reject the pattern of this world not to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” This is why Paul speaks directly about the state’s divine authority and its function as God’s servant.³ The state is a manifestation of common grace and serves an important function in “this age” even though it is destined to perish. Civil government should keep the peace and promote the public good. This is government’s divinely ordained purpose.

In the previous section, Paul has made the point that Christians should not seek revenge upon their enemies. But what happens to evil-doers before the return of the Lord, when they will be judged? According to Paul, it falls to the state to bring temporal punishment on such evil-doers, since a full, final and righteous judgment will come at the *eschaton*. God gives the sword to government, which not only justifies a national self-defense (military), but extends to capital punishment for capital crimes. Thus the secular state—not the individual citizen, not the individual Christian, and not certainly not the church—is a servant of God and is given the sword to both protect its citizens and punish evil-doers.

Therefore, any discussion of civil disobedience then must begin with the premise that God has established the state and civil authority to do exercise this limited function. Only when the state intentionally and repeatedly fails to do these things is even civil disobedience a topic for discussion. And then, the entire burden of proof falls upon the Christian to prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that legitimate civil government has been transformed into a satanic beast which persecutes the people of God—such as we see in the Book of Revelation. But once the case is made that the government has abandoned its divinely ordained-role, the Christian is obligated to resist the state, first, by peaceful means and only if necessary, through civil disobedience.

With this background in mind, let us turn to our text, Romans 13:1-7.

With this background in mind, let us turn to our text, Romans 13:1-7. In verses 1 and 2, Paul writes, “*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*” Even though there is no connecting particle linking verse 1 to the previous section, what follows quite naturally flows from the preceding discussion.⁴ Since Christians are not to seek vengeance upon wrong doers (Paul has just told us that God will himself ensure final justice) God assigns to the civil authorities the role of punishing evil-doers

³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 791.

⁴ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 460.

during this present evil age. This gives the state a very important but strictly defined function.

It is quite significant that Paul does not say, “brothers, you must submit yourselves to the governing authorities.” Rather he says “all souls” are to submit, meaning that all men and women, regardless of their religious commitments, are to submit to the governing authorities.⁵ This is an emphatic and universal command and must be understood within the parameters of natural law and common grace. God uses the secular state to restrain evil until the final judgment. All of its citizens, of all different religions, are to submit to its governing authority.

Notice too the absence of any mention of a Christian state or government existing anywhere upon the earth. Paul refers to Rome, a pagan empire, as the governing authority which God has established. Nor is there any discussion of a marriage between church and state. Exercising its role in the kingdom of Christ, the church restrains evil and contributes to the well-being of the state by preaching the gospel and instructing its members to be good citizens. But the church has no authority to engage in civil government, nor is the church ever given the sword. This is the domain of civil government. This means that Christians are to be good citizens and influence society by serving as salt and light. But the church is to be about its own divinely-given mandate, namely preaching the word and administering the sacraments.

Although the word for submit, can be translated “obey,” submit is a better translation because Paul is not asking for a blind obedience to all civil governments. We should consider Peter’s comment in Acts 5:29—“*we must obey God rather than men.*” In this context, Paul is speaking of submission to the governing authorities through recognition that the state’s authority comes from God. But this command entails far more responsibility for Christians living in those countries where they are not facing oppressive governments, where they are free to exercise their faith and participate in civil government as good citizens, who also happen to be Christians. In this context, Christians are not only summoned to be good citizens, we should even consider government service as a legitimate calling. In a democracy such as ours, Paul’s exhortation means that there is no excuse whatsoever for Christians not to vote and participate in local, state, and federal elections, as an informed voter who is also a Christian.⁶

The next clause is also significant: “*for there is no authority except that which God has established.*” The reason we submit to governing authorities is that they have been established by God. The authority of the state is not absolute, but limited. The state exists at the pleasure of God. Thus a government’s authority is derivative and comes from God. The state’s authority is not original. The state cannot grant rights, it can only recognize rights that already exist because God gives them. This also means that the state cannot command its citizens to break the law of God, since this act violates the authority God has given to it.⁷ Although it is a minister of God, the state’s authority is also limited by God.

In context, then, Paul is telling Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman church that the Roman government is a legitimate civil authority, because such authority come from God. Christians should, therefore, submit to the government. But the question about what to do if and when the Roman

⁵ Contra Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.656

⁶ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.663.

⁷ Morris, Epistle to the Romans, p. 461.

government exceeds this God-given authority is not addressed here. However, I think it is safe to say that at the very least, when Paul says “*the authorities that exist have been established by God,*” he is saying that the state’s authority is never absolute. Jesus made the same point when he distinguished between things that are God’s and things that are Caesar’s. Civil disobedience can only be considered in reference to the state’s shirking its responsibility to protect the good (when the state allows anarchy) or exceeding its legitimate authority (by demanding that its citizens disobey the law of God).

In verse 2, Paul goes on to say that there is no basis upon which to rebel against legitimate civil authority. The state’s authority comes from God, therefore to rebel against the state is to rebel against God. God has instituted the state and given the state the authority to bring judgment upon the rebels. Again, the question as to whether and when the state forfeits such authority is not answered here. As one writer puts it, what Paul does say is “resistance to legitimate authority legitimately exercised is wrong.” But as F. F. Bruce reminds us: “the state not only may but must be resisted when it demands the allegiance due to God alone.”⁸ This is what is pictured in the Book of Revelation, when the dragon (Satan) turns legitimate civil government into a god-hating persecutor of the church. When the state takes to itself prerogatives which are God’s alone, Christians must resist the state, first by peaceful means, and only in desperation through civil disobedience, and only with the intention of re-instituting a legitimate secular government.

In verse 3, Paul writes, “*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 he will commend you.*” Paul’s approach to things is thoroughly grounded in Scripture and common sense. Simply paraphrased, “People who behave themselves need not fear the state. The state is only terrifying to those who commit crimes.” Good citizens have nothing to fear from legitimate civil authority. That being said, we do find an important clue here as to legitimate civil disobedience—what do we do when the state willfully punishes those who behave themselves and rewards those who don’t. Does such a government have God’s authority? The answer is “no!” The state has authority when it serves to punish evil doers and provides for the public welfare. It loses its authority when it fails to do so, and must be replaced by a government which will do as God commands. In our present situation this is done through the ballot box.

In verse 4, Paul goes on to say about civil authorities, “*For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*” Paul’s point here is to define with a bit more specificity just what he means by God’s authority. First of all, the state is God’s servant. Therefore the government not only exists at the pleasure of God, it exists to perform a specific service—to do good, in the sense of promoting the public well-being as defined, for example, in the sense of 1 Timothy 2:2, where Paul instructs us to pray “*for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*” As a servant of God, the state is to ensure that its citizens are able to live peaceful, quiet, godly, and even prosperous lives.

But to those who rebel against the legitimate authority of the state, Paul says, be warned, for God gives to the state “the sword,” for the purpose of bringing punishment down upon the evil-doer. The state is an agent of wrath, not in the sense of eschatological wrath, but certainly in the sense of temporal punishment. From this it is clear that legitimate governing authority is to be armed and is permitted to exercise force to defend itself from enemies, foreign and domestic, so as to keep the peace and protect

⁸ Morris, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 461.

the public well-being. Even as individuals are given the right of self defense, so are nations. While Paul is not specifically arguing for just war theory or capital punishment in the passage, it seems to me that given the apostle's assertion that God gives the sword to the government, the burden of proof falls squarely upon those who advocate national pacifism and who decry capital punishment.

In verse 5, Paul writes, *“Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”* When Paul uses *dio* (“therefore”) in verse 5, he is drawing a conclusion. Because the state is God's servant, a Christian should submit to the state not only to avoid the sword, but also as a matter of conscience because this is what God wants us to do. This is an important point because it extends the Christian's duty beyond that of avoiding punishment, to the importance of doing right. By doing good, believers need not struggle against conscience. Life is so much simpler and more rewarding if our consciences are not burdened with sins. But notice also that the converse is also true. The state cannot impose upon Christians those things which would violate their consciences—i.e., those things which would require Christians to break God's commandments.

In verses 6-7, Paul goes on to say, *“This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”* While I wish these verses were not here, the fact of the matter is, they are. Paul tells us we are to pay taxes to support God's servants so that they can be devoted to doing their duty. Caesar is clearly entitled to what is his. That being said, it is possible for a government to exceed its legitimate authority through excessive taxation. In such cases, the government is stealing from its citizens what is rightfully theirs. As Christians, it is a matter of good stewardship that we keep that for which we have labored so as to provide for our own families. The state was given the right to tax, but not to tax excessively (undercutting the principle of private property).

Finally, Paul reminds us of the fact that if the governing authorities are God's servants, we must give them what they deserve: taxes, revenue, respect and honor. Since civil authority comes from God, we do indeed need to give honor to those who serve honorably in the city of man. We respect the office of those who govern, even if we cannot respect the individual who holds that office. But we also honor such authorities in less obvious ways. We honor governing authorities by being willing to serve in political office if that is our calling. We honor them by praying for those whom God has placed over us in positions of governmental authority. We honor them by doing our best to ensure that civil authorities govern as God has ordained them to do. In this country, we are being good citizens by voting for those who will serve wisely, honorably, and who are willing to work within the divinely-ordained mandate and limits placed upon the state. People who seek to govern because they desire power, money and prestige will not make very good governing authorities. People who seek to serve society, probably will.

While God commands that his church be governed by faithful and Godly men who see themselves as servants of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, this is not necessarily the case when it comes to the city of man. It was Martin Luther who reportedly once said, “I'd rather be governed by a wise Turk (Muslim) than a foolish Christian.” Luther has it right. We must keep the kingdom of Christ and the civil kingdom completely distinct. But since we are Christ's, we are citizens of two kingdoms. Our citizenship in the kingdom of Christ has been bestowed upon us because God has been merciful to us in Jesus Christ. In this kingdom the issue is the forgiveness of sins and the gift of a perfect righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. But things are different in the civil kingdom. We are citizens of this nation, because this is the nation of our birth. The freedoms and prosperity we enjoy are truly gifts from God. And we are commanded to be good citizens of this kingdom, by obeying the laws, being informed voters, serving in civil government, and praying for those who rule over us. For the civil authorities are God's servants.

God has ordained them to punish evil-doers and keep the peace. And when they do this, we must submit to their divinely-mandated authority and render them the honor they deserve. Amen.