



I enjoy studying American History and I enjoy studying the Bible. One spring about 10 years ago my two interests came together beautifully. I was able to take a tour of east coast historical sites and learn first-hand about the influence Christianity had on the founding of our nation. I learned about the Magna Carta and its influence on our Constitution and Bill of Rights. I stood alongside Plymouth Rock and learned about how the Mayflower Compact influenced the value of rights from God and self-government. I learned about Lex Rex that said that law was king and that kings were not above the law. I saw Revolutionary War flags that said, "Give me liberty or give me death," "Don't tread on me," "We serve only one king, king Jesus." As a history nerd I was in nerd history heaven.

It was fascinating to me to see that The Founders of our nation referenced Isaiah 33:22, which says, *"For the Lord is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, and the LORD is our King."* They used this verse from Isaiah as their inspiration to separate the ruling powers of our government into Executive, Legislative and Judicial to keep the power spread about among many sinners instead of just a few sinners in government. We cannot turn on the news without hearing the government this, the government that. We cannot carry out our daily lives without taking into account the influence of government, whether it is federal, state, county or local. Government has influence.

It's fashionable to criticize government. Their failures, inefficiency, overreach are the punch line of jokes. Ronald Reagan, our 40th President, once said this. "Some of the scariest words ever spoken are: 'Hello I am from the government and I am here to help you.'" We are not here today to bash government. We are here to learn what God says about government.

But we are also not here today to conclude that since government is an institution established by God it always knows best and should never be questioned or protested. What kind of nation would the United States be if citizens didn't protest and fight for the removal of slavery, or fight to establish equal rights for women or racial equality? What kind of world would we have if our government didn't mobilize a military to defeat the Nazis, stand up to communism and terrorism? Some of us here today have to struggle so much against our governments rules and regulations we just have nothing good to say about the government.

Some of you may be heading to a park after church today. You will drive on a government-funded road in a car that has been government inspected to assure that it has met safety standards. You may pick up a sandwich on the way and you trust that the meat, cheese and mayonnaise are safe for your family to eat because a government inspector made sure that our local establishments followed food preparation standards.

So what's my point? We can be conflicted when it comes to government. I don't want the last thing we remember about this teaching

today to be a collective sadness about how far government has drifted from God's design. My prayer is that the last thing for each of us to remember today is our appropriate response as Christians based on what Paul teaches us about government.

The Big Idea for today is this: Government is an institution established by God so Christians should submit to its authority and work to improve its function for the good of society. Here are some great questions to ask ourselves: What is the exact role of government? What responsibilities does it have to its citizens? What responsibilities do citizens have to their governments? How is God specifically calling us to influence our government for good?

Last week Matt did a wonderful job sharing from Romans 12. He showed us that because of God's great mercy each of us is set apart as a living sacrifice to love those in our lives. It is an act of worship to love those in our family, in our church, in the community of people we interact with on a regular basis, and even to love those who don't like us. To love like this is a tremendous challenge and we freely admit that we cannot manufacture this love ourselves. We learned that it is God's love demonstrated in the gospel that flows to us and then through us that allows us to love as Paul tells us to love.

How is it that God's love is so powerful? It's powerful because it's the same love that allowed a father to sacrifice his only son on a cross. It's powerful because it's the same love that allows a sinless man to offer forgiveness to sinners and take the penalty for the sins of sinners on himself. It's the same love that revealed to us the victory of the risen Christ. This powerful love came to us when we first believed and accepted Jesus Christ as our personal savior. And it's this powerful love of Christ that we deliver to others, even to those who are most difficult to love. It's interesting that right after Paul talked about loving those who persecute us, and that we are to not retaliate but we are to leave room for God's judgment, that he then chooses to teach us on the role of government. Because this powerful love is the same love that allows us to submit to a government flaws and all.

### **The Divine Authority of Government**

*"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"* (v. 1). First of all, God is pro-government. Given the fallen nature of the human race, God has decreed that some form of earthly oversight is necessary for the welfare and prosperity of people. The word Paul uses for authority here means delegated power. Paul is saying that there is no authority except that which God has established. And the authority, no matter how good or bad it is, only exists because God established it. This means that civil government deserves our respect, and those in positions of control in government are

there because God sanctioned it. So the institution of government deserves our submission.

Two important qualifiers on this: First, this is not to say that God endorses every person who holds government office. God grants those in authority freedom to exercise that authority as they see fit, and they don't always exercise it rightly. From the Pharaohs in Egypt to the emperors of Rome to the kings of Europe to the dictators and tyrants of the 20th century and the present, rulers continually betray their delegated authority. And citizens do not always choose wisely. Hitler rose to power on popular support.

Remember when Jesus stood before Pilate and Pilate was trying to figure out a way to free Jesus because he didn't see him as a threat to Rome? He said to Jesus, "Don't you realize that I have the power to free you or to crucify you?" Then Jesus responds with one of the classic texts for helping us to understand the God-given role of civil government: Jesus answered, "**You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above**" (John 19:11).

Our second qualifier: We cannot assume that God has ordained any particular form of government. As much as I see a Christian influence on our republic, it's not clear from scripture that God prefers democracy or monarchy or something in between. So after calling us to submit to our government authorities, he then gives a reason why in verse 2. "**Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.**"

So it's clear that Paul is saying if we rebel against this authority we are rebelling against God and if we do rebel we can expect to bring a judgment upon ourselves. In other words, don't expect things to go well if you rebel against government.

Verse 2 raises the question in my mind, "You mean Paul is saying submit to every foolish thing a government decrees or face judgment?" The intensity of this question grows when we consider that Paul lived under a non-Christian government, which was at best unfriendly to Christians, at worst hostile to Christians. What Paul is saying is that our default position is to submit. Christians are not to be anarchists. This passage is about respect for authority. It's about respect for God's servant, government.

I watched the HBO special on John Adams last year, and you could see how our founders wrestled over whether they should continue to submit to a corrupt British Monarchy as unto God or rebel against it. There were loud, eloquent and intelligent men arguing against independence and urging loyalty to England. It took months to arrive at a vote for independence. They concluded that they had to leave their default position and honor God be establishing a new Government.

Now Paul moves from the divine authority of government to the divine purpose of government. Look at verses 3-4.

### **The Divine Purpose of Government**

*"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. 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."*

What is the purpose of government? It basically has two purposes: First, it's to protect the good by rewarding the good. And second, it's to punish evil by wielding force against the wrongdoer.

He refers to government as God's servants. Today, this means legislators, civil servants, police, social workers, soldiers and teachers. This wording of God's servants is powerful. Paul uses the same term to describe ministers in the church. So we can conclude that government workers are ministers from the Lord. It's not only right to submit, it's also wise.

Do you want to be free from fear? Submit. Stop at red lights. Pay your taxes. Remember, government is designed for our own good. Government is in place for all of us to live in a peaceful society. But there is always a threat of the sword. Each year we voluntarily self assess how much we owe in taxes. It's voluntary, right? Then we voluntarily pay billions of dollars to federal, state and local governments. But it is truly voluntary? If we refuse to pay our income taxes we will be billed for the deficient with penalties and interest. And if we still refuse to pay we will be arrested. But God is saying without the threat of the sword, human sin would make society impossible.

Paul is saying that in most circumstances, if we put ourselves at odds with government we put ourselves in opposition to God's instrument of justice. But if we do what is right we gain a good reputation with those in authority.

We may resent tax day, but if we really think about it, every one of us benefit in some way from government and should have some skin in the game to contribute to the common good and protect the most innocent and vulnerable. I know it is hard, but we are called to think of government officials and even elected politicians as servants of God whose role is to protect society from evil forces within and without, and promote God's concern for justice, goodness, compassion and peace.

History proves itself over and over that government doesn't naturally grow more moral over time. And government fails every time when it tries to develop morality in its citizens. Morality only comes from those who sincerely desire to please God.

The point is that the best assets in our nation are Christians who seek true justice and true righteousness. 2nd Chronicles 7:14 says, "**if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.**" This great Old Testament text doesn't offer healing for a nation by electing a better president or passing better laws. It offers healing and renewal through the repentance of us, God's people.

Now we are starting to see the Christian's responsibility to government. In verse 5 it's as if he throws in an afterthought. Oh yes, one more thing, and it's about conscience.

### **The Christian's Responsibility to Government**

*"Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience."* This is big for Christians. Our conscience involves our sense of right and wrong and even more importantly our awareness that we ought to do what is right. It's two Latin words put together and translated as "with-knowledge." We should obey government not just so we won't get into trouble, but we should

obey government because we know deep down that it's the right thing to do. In our hearts we know what's right.

Paul is saying, Christians have a higher motive than others. Our obedience matters to God. Our obedience matters to society. Don't fall into, "well everyone ignores that law" or "that's a stupid law anyway." It hit me last week, talking about ministry with someone on my cell on speaker but still holding my phone barreling down Hwy. 92. The dear person on the other end reminded me that there are huge fines if you get caught breaking the law in this way. This showed me that I wasn't respecting authority because I thought the law was a stupid law. And by not respecting authority I was not being a good example of a Christian. She graciously didn't remind me of that truth; she let me figure that one out myself.

Paul's principle is radical. He is telling us that when we obey a law of the land out of conscience, we are really obeying God. So if there are no civil consequences to not obeying we are to obey God anyway. But it cuts both ways. There can be actions that are pronounced legal by our society but they still violate our consciences. Here are a couple of examples: Abortion and pornography are both legal in our nation, both are the law of the land, but both violate our God-given consciences.

*"This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 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"* (verses 6-7). They had a problem with high taxes back then too. But it wasn't just that they were too high. Christians were asking, "Why should we give Rome money to build pagan temples? Why should we give Rome money, they will just misuse it? In fact, aren't we financing our own persecution by paying taxes?" Paul is saying, "You think every tax dollar you pay has to be justified? You're not paying taxes because they are fair. Your paying taxes because Rome asked you to. It's not the what, it's the who. If the government God established asks, you give them what you owe."

Let's not be the people who say, "God doesn't agree with everything the government does, so I don't have to pay my taxes." This is wrong, and as we saw back in verse 2 it's rebellion and is going to reap the judgment of God. We can't gloss over the phrase, "give their full time to governing." We need to show respect because these government workers are God's servants and are likely working hard in tough environments.

Few would argue that taxes are not high enough. Few would argue that government doesn't have enough revenue. Few would argue that government doesn't spend enough. But how efficiently our government functions isn't Paul's concern here. His point is to Christians. Paul is saying, "Christians capture the high ground by doing what honors and glorifies God. Elevate society. Be the best examples."

Remember the classic text when Jesus' enemies came to Jesus with a trick question? "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" They thought if he said it was right to pay taxes it would discredit him with those who hated Rome because taxes were a burden. But if Jesus said don't pay taxes to Rome, they knew that Rome would arrest him as an insurrectionist. So what did Jesus do? He asked for a coin. They produced one. He asked, "Whose portrait is on it?" And they said, "Caesars." It's the exact teaching

of Romans 13:7. *"Then he said to them, 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's'"* (Matt. 22:21).

At that point, I could imagine that Jesus flipped the coin over and exposed the back on which there would have been a portrait of one of the Roman gods or goddesses, and he continued, making the contrast. "And to God what is God's." The first part reinforced Caesar's authority, even in taxes, and then his second part drew limits. As we said, the State has a God-given and therefore legitimate authority. But the authority of God is greater. He gives us a hint here about the limits God places on government. So to the government, Paul says, Submit... Pay Taxes... Show Respect.

Here is another passage that sheds light on this: Paul in 1st Timothy 2:1-2 says this: *"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."* To say it another way...

#### **Pray – always**

Do you pray regularly for those in government? Do you regularly pray for those in authority over you? Do you pray for those who are trying to live out their faith as civil servants as it gets harder and harder?

#### **Cooperate – when at all possible**

Do you follow the laws, even ones you think are silly or inconvenient to you? Can you be a person who speaks positively about the good things government does and give them credit? Can you be an encouragement to others to do the same?

This was convicting to me. When I moved to California, I noticed that everybody recycles. I thought I can do this too. So I began gathering all our bottles and cans and put them in sacks in the back of my car to take to my local Safeway. They had a can crushing, bottle breaking machine and with a few sacks I could get enough for a latte. This was great! It was going to be a new hobby. But I noticed that the unit was only open Monday through Friday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. I was rarely available then. Not only that, when I was it seemed like the machine was always out of order. I was pretty negative about how inconvenient it was to try to recycle for a latte. And I got real negative about how government messes things up. One evening I noticed that the machine was gone. I asked the clerk and he said, "That machine, it was the Ford Pinto of recycle machines. It was always breaking down." So I must confess that I am not the best recycler.

We are beginning a new teaching series this summer at CPC about things people on the peninsula think a lot about. We are calling it "Trending Now." We are teaching on what the Bible says about all kinds of interesting topics and each of us are assigned a topic to research. Well, I must have missed a meeting because I got assigned, "What the Bible says about ecology and the environment." I can't think of a less interesting subject to me. God has a sense of humor!

#### **Challenge – when necessary**

Let's say we reverse the message of Romans 13:3-4. Let's say that our government, instead of protecting the good and punishing evil, starts protecting evil and punishing good. What are we to do as Christians? In other words, how should we respond if we are suddenly called to render to Caesar what is legitimately God's?

Whenever laws are enacted that force us to contradict God's law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian Duty. We can illustrate this right from the Bible. When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill newborn boys, these brave women refused to obey because they feared God more than Pharaoh. When King Nebuchadnezzar issued an edict that all his subjects must fall down and worship his golden image, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey. When King Darius made a decree that for 30 days nobody should pray to any god or to any man except himself, Daniel refused to obey. And when the Sanhedrin banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles refused to obey. All of these were heroic refusals. Each are examples of civil disobedience against an immoral law. Each involved great personal risk. But in each case they demonstrated giving to God what is God's.

So what does giving to God what is God's look like in practical terms for us? Let me close with three areas:

**Evangelism.** Our ultimate allegiance is to Christ and our highest calling is to bring the good news of the gospel to bear on the whole world. Back in 1988, Julie and I were on a short term mission trip to Czechoslovakia. The country was communist at that time and taking in Bibles and Christian literature was against their law. But we felt strongly that we needed to violate their law because we were aligning with God's higher moral law. So we broke their law by smuggling in our sleeping bags Bibles and gospel tracts that we handed out in their country.

If the state forbids the preaching of the gospel or evangelism, we must disobey. It's because Christians have a God-given duty to evangelize. It's called the great commission. He said, *"You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts. 1:8.)

If we read through the first few chapters of Acts we see that the authorities tried to shut down the disciples from preaching the gospel. The apostles were arrested, threatened and then released. Then what did they do? They went right back to preaching the gospel. Then they were arrested again and the High Priest said, "We have given you strict orders not to teach in this name of Jesus. Yet you continue." Here was the apostles reply from Acts 5:29, *"We must obey God rather than men."* This is becoming more and more of a challenge as our nation becomes increasingly more intolerant of speaking publicly about one's Christian faith. But preaching the gospel even in the face of opposition is an example of rendering unto God what is God's.

**Morality.** No government has the right to command Christians to perform immoral or non-Christian acts. During the era of Nazi Germany, Christians faced huge challenges because their homeland had become an anti-Christian state. Citizens were commanded not to protect Jews. Corrie ten Boom and her family were right to hide Jews and try to save their lives. And she and her family were arrested for it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right to speak out against Hitler. He eventually was arrested and executed.

In our own country we are called to pray for our Christian brothers and sisters who are standing up and refusing to do things their consciences tell them are immoral in their jobs. Every day folks that sit right next to us in church face ridicule, threats of expensive lawsuits, even job loss as they render to God what is God's.

**Civil Disobedience.** This week I read Martin Luther King's "Letters from a Birmingham Jail." He originally wrote this in the margins of old newspapers and had them smuggled out of the jail. "The Letters" are a powerful treaty on the rationale for using peaceful civil disobedience and even to break a non-moral law like trespassing to fight against a wrong moral law that accepted racial inequality in the south in the 1960's. King chastised evangelical pastors in the south for not leading the charge on this.

There is a danger today of giving too much to Caesar and not enough to God. Here are some applications that I thought about this week to the question, "What is my strategy to help transform unrighteous aspects of government?"

First, we need to look at the way we are living ourselves. We need to align with Jesus so that we will have an alternative, winsome and brave witness that is noticeable and will influence people.

Second, we need to vote to advance the values and the policies we believe in. I'm not telling you how to vote. I don't believe any party has a corner on the righteousness of God. But when 50% of Christians don't go to the polls, there's an issue. We are not using the influence God has given us to use. We value free speech for evangelism and preaching, we should value free speech by voting as well.

Third, we need to study the issues and the facts. We shouldn't repeat what we heard some commentator or partisan said about an issue as fact without personally looking for the truth ourselves. We've got to do our homework and engage without rage if we want to reform a system that isn't working well.

We need to speak the truth in love. And if we can't speak in love we are probably not speaking the truth. We need to be reminded that the most significant battle is not between Republicans and Democrats. It's between those who would erase God's name and voice from the public square and the next generation, and those who know the Constitution and know that erasing God from government is bad for all people, even atheists.

Former British Prime Minister, the late Margaret Thatcher, was an unusual politician who understood the importance of limits on government and called for its renewal by people able to live a life of true faith. She said, "The truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition are infinitely precious, not only, as I believe, because they are true, but also because they provide the moral impulse which alone can lead to peace, for which we all long. There is little hope for democracy if the hearts of men and women in democratic societies cannot be touched by a call to something greater than themselves."

Romans 13:1-7 is a call-out to Christians: The church is the hope of the world.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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