

"Government and the Gospel"
Politics, Polarization, and Our Christian Witness #3
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(Rm. 13:1-7)

Introduction.

The issue of a Christian's relationship to government has been a vitally important subject of discussion throughout the history of the Church. And Christians have always been faced with a struggle in this matter because over the centuries the Church has found itself under the authority of all kinds of governments and rulers with different perspectives on leadership and the exercise of power. Whether it was living under the rule of a monarch, a totalitarian dictator, the aristocracy of a nation, or the Communist Party, believers have had to figure out government and the gospel.

Traditionally and historically, the Church in America has had less trouble with its response to government than believers have in many other countries – like our brothers and sisters who live in China, Russia, or in Muslim countries in the Arab world. We live in a society that has been influenced by Christian values, and we have a Constitution which ensures the freedom of assembly and the freedom to worship as we feel led by God. Our circumstances are nothing like those of the followers of Christ who lived in the days when the New Testament was being written when Caesar was king, and the Roman government was in control.

What exactly is the role of the State, and how far should a Christian be willing to go in submitting to government? Paul speaks to this matter in the passage before us this morning. In the course of our time together, I want to address three things as it relates to this topic. They are: 1) the Purpose of the State; 2) our Submission to the State; and 3) the Separation of Church and State.

I. The Purpose of the State.

Paul writes, *"...there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ...For [the ruler] 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 for wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (13:1,4).*

In this passage the apostle says that the State, or government, has a God-appointed role and function, and the follower of Jesus Christ is called to do certain things in relation to it. Paul's instructions aren't directed at Christian citizens who live in a country which has a good government that is led by righteous leaders. It applies to all Christians who live under any number of the kinds of government that have existed in the world and regardless of whether or not their leaders have been good or bad.

We should remember that Paul wrote during a time when Christians didn't have any political power, and the Roman and Jewish rulers of his day, which included Nero, were largely unfriendly and even hostile to the Church. Paul's words in this regard are even more surprising and pointed when you consider the context in which they were written.

In spite of opposition to the Church, the apostle regarded the governing authorities as having been established by God, and he encouraged believers to submit to them and to pray for them. Both the Old and New Testaments remind us that God is sovereign over human affairs, and it is only by His wisdom and will that kings reign and presidents govern (See Dn. 4:17,25,32; Pr. 8:15f.).

There are three things this passage tells us in particular about the purpose of the State. **First**, the text says that **the State was instituted by the God, and its purpose is to be a servant of God**. One of the common misconceptions in political thought today is that the role of government is determined by the will and power of people. However, when Pilate questioned Jesus on the eve of His execution, Christ told the governor that he would not even hold his office or have any political authority if it had not been granted to him by God.

Paul says here that the civil authority is actually God's servant. The word that is translated "servant" can also be translated "minister." And it's the same word that Paul uses to describe the work of a pastor, elder, or a deacon in the Church. The Bible says that governing authorities are established by God, and they have a divine role and function as God's servants. And this is true whether or not they are Christians, and whether or not they even realize it.

Second, the passage says that the purpose of the State is **to restrain sin and evil**. Government originated as an ordinance of God which we read about in the book of Genesis, and while it cannot redeem the world or be used as a tool to establish His Kingdom on earth, nevertheless civil government does establish the boundaries and limits of human behavior. Some things are permitted, and they are legal. Others are not. The State isn't a remedy for sin and evil, but it is supposed to be a means to restrain it.

Finally, government shouldn't just perform the negative function of restraining evil. It also has the positive function of **promoting a just social order** so that all people can live in harmony and everyone can flourish. Elsewhere Paul had this in mind when he urged Timothy to pray *"for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness"* (1 Tim. 2:2).

So we see that the purpose of government is to restrain sin and promote a just social order all in the service of God. And this applies to all the various forms of governments that have existed in all times and places whether those governments are led by Christians or not.

By this standard we see the ways in which governments have failed terribly in fulfilling these purposes of God, and that includes America. It's clear that our government has failed to restrain sin and promote a just social during the history of our nation, and this was especially true in the early centuries of our country's existence because of our tolerance of the institution of slavery. As former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said, slavery is America's birth defect. And we've been dealing with the tragic effects of that original sin to this day. Whenever the State falls down on the job of restraining evil and promoting a just social order, it is failing to fulfill God's primary purpose for government as His servant.

II. Our Submission to the State.

Paul continues in this passage and writes, *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.... Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.... Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes.... Give everyone what you own him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor"* (13:1,2,5,6,7).

A. The Call to Submission. Here Paul gives a clear command of universal application that all believers are to submit to the governing authorities. Paul cautions the followers of Christ not to be anarchists. Rather, we're to recognize the State as a divine institution with divine authority. It's a pretty shocking statement given the context in which the apostle lived.

As I shared with you last week, the early American statesman Daniel Webster once said, "Whatever makes people good Christians also makes them good citizens."¹ The reason is because according to Scripture every believer has a civic duty, and we're called to submit to the governing authorities over us. Many people pay their taxes for no other reason than they are terrified of an audit by the Internal Revenue Service. But the follower of Christ should have no such fear, because as Christians we should report our income properly, claim our deductions legitimately, and obey the law as a matter of principle in obedience to God's Word.

When it comes to honoring the king and praying for people in authority, it may be that you don't appreciate the politics of an individual who holds office, and you may even deplore the official's personal life and behavior. But as Christians we're called to show respect and honor for those who have been elected or appointed to office, knowing that the office they hold is ordained by God. So we honor the office, if not the person.

B. The Limits of Submission. Having said that, I want to be quick to add that Paul's words are not a blanket call to an unequivocal and blind submission to the State. Rather, the follower of Jesus is called to submit to the State only so long and insofar as the State doesn't require the believer to violate his/her conviction and commitment as a Christian or demand an allegiance that is superior to one's allegiance to God. In those situations, the follower of Jesus may actually be called upon to disobey the State whenever it requires of us something that is contrary to God's commands in Scripture.

We see examples of this in many places in the Bible. For example, when Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn Jewish boys, they refused to obey, and Moses was spared. When King Nebuchadnezzar issued an edict that all his subjects must fall down and worship his golden statue, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said no. And when the Sanhedrin banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles responded by saying, *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard"* (Acts 4:18).

We also see examples of this in recent history. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who as a Christian joined the resistance movement in Nazi Germany during World War II. He was arrested and hanged for his opposition to Hitler. I think of African Americans in this country in the 1960s who came out of the black church and protested segregation and advocated for civil rights through sit-ins, marches, and boycotts. They called for America to live up to her truest and best ideals. I also think of Christian Suffragettes in this country who fought to give women the right to vote 100 years ago. (Can I get an Amen?!) And I think of Christians in Nepal today who refuse to obey the law in that country against evangelizing in the name of Jesus, and they

are arrested and put in prison for their actions and beliefs. In all these situations, civil disobedience was justified because of a commitment to Christ who had a higher law to which they were accountable.

The basic principle of Scripture is straightforward – civil authorities are to be obeyed, unless they set themselves in opposition to God's divine law. And laws are to be followed unless the law is unjust. In such instances, civil disobedience is not only justified but also warranted when a government attempts to take over the role of the Church or try and claim allegiance that is due only to God. And on those occasions the follower of Jesus not only has the right but the duty to resist, and we should actively protest unjust laws.

III. The Separation of Church and State.

In this passage Paul doesn't give us a complete treatise on the respective rights and roles of Church and State. It's clear from Scripture that both were created by God, and both serve as His ministers. God created Church and State to be two spheres of authority and influence. They need to be kept separate, and the authority of each should be held in tension with the other.

On one occasion, the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus over the question of allegiance, and they asked Him, "Tell us, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If He said no, He would be a threat to the Roman government. If He said yes, He would lose the respect of the Jewish people, who all hated the Romans. Jesus asked them for a coin – a Roman denarius, the only coin that could be used to pay the hated yearly poll tax. Jesus asked the religious leaders, "Whose portrait is this?" "Caesar's," they replied. And then Jesus concluded by saying, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," and He handed the coin back to them.

Jesus not only eluded their trap that day, He also put Caesar in his place and established a balance to the role of both Church and State. Theologian Edmund Clowney once made the observation, "Christ did not give the keys of the Kingdom to Caesar, nor did He give Peter the sword."² In God's provision, the State isn't to seize authority over ecclesiastical or spiritual matters, nor is the Church to seek authority over the government of a country. And the constant temptation for each is to encroach upon the other.

John Ortberg writes: "To Rome, the existence of the gods immensely enhanced Caesar's authority. To Jesus, the existence of God immensely limited Caesar's authority. The kingdom of Rome is not the kingdom of heaven. There is another sphere above Caesar's, to which everyone – including Caesar – will give account. An untried idea is being put forward here – one we might call the separation of church and state. The original opponent of this idea was not the church; it was the state. When you read the history of the church, every time we've lost the separation of church and state, every time the church and state marry, the state wins and the church loses. The church has never done well when it is merged with the state; it operates best from the margins."

This is one of the reasons why I believe many Evangelical leaders who are social conservatives have made a mistake in recent years in seeking political power in this country. I think they have been willing to compromise biblical values in exchange for what they think will give them power and influence. Throughout history many a Christian leader has been willing to sell his or her soul to be given a seat next to the king.

One of the beautiful features of American democracy is an appreciation for the separation of Church and State. Religion and politics can't be separated; they invariably overlap. But the institutions of Church and State must preserve their separate and distinct roles. The Founding Fathers of our country saw the wisdom of this, so the First Amendment was added to our Constitution.

However, contrary to the popular belief of many today, the separation of Church and State did not mean that America was to be a nation that is free of religious belief. Nor did it mean that religion and politics could be separated, or that religious values should be removed from the public square. The Founding Fathers were well aware that the form of limited government they were adopting could only succeed if there was an underlying consensus of values that was shared by the population. As our society has become increasingly secular and individualistic, the common ground which holds us together as a people has become less and less. And the danger is that democracy can devolve into mob rule. And any nation which fails to acknowledge God is sovereign will soon find itself no longer blessed by the Lord.

Conclusion and Application.

What does all this mean for you and me in real life? How can we put into practice what the Bible teaches regarding government and the gospel? One thing you can do is exercise your right to vote this fall. A friend of mine says that if you don't vote you can't complain. I agree. Another positive step is to advocate in constructive ways for a more just social order. Identify where you think America is falling short and get involved to help bring creative change. And a final but important step I would encourage you to explore is to do exactly what the Bible says we should do as Christian citizens – pray for those in authority on a regular basis.

As I close, I want to share with you the story of one man who took this challenge seriously. His name is James, and I read about him this summer. When he was a young man, James read in Scripture that Christians are supposed to pray “for kings and all those in authority.” So, he began praying for Jimmy Carter when he was elected president in 1977. He did this because, as he said, he was “distracted that one of those Democrats became president.” He was pretty conservative in his politics at the time.

Ever since then, James has made a commitment to pray for both the president and his city's mayor every single day. *Every single day.* James is able to recall specific prayers he has prayed for every president from 1977 until now. He's never missed a day.

When James was asked about why he prayed for both the president and the mayor of his city, he said this:

“I pray for them because Jesus is my Lord and God's Word is a lamp unto my feet. Even if I don't like what I read in the Scriptures, I take it to heart. And so, I pray for wisdom, integrity, protection, and guidance for those in authority. But over the years, I learned that I needed to engage in this discipline not just for them, but for me. Praying for them every single day helped humanize them for me...and it also made me more human. It has helped soften some of my hardness, anger, or cynicism that I began to feel against leaders with whom I disagree. It reminds me that they're people just like me, created in God's image, with fears, insecurities, and hopes. It also reminds me that they need Jesus and, most importantly, that Jesus loves them. And finally, praying for leaders

reminds me that my trust isn't in human authority, which is why I don't pray to them...but rather to Jesus."³

I would encourage you later this fall to make a commitment to pray for whomever is elected president, whether you vote for Donald Trump or Joe Biden. I also encourage you to make a commitment to submit to the laws of our land in obedience to Christ, even when they are inconvenient or demanding. And finally, I encourage you as an engaged Christian citizen to work to make the laws of our nation as just and fair as they possibly can be so that everyone can flourish and we can live up to the high ideals upon which this great country was founded. May we be faithful never to forsake our calling to be the Church and to hold the State accountable to God who is the Lord of human history. Amen.

¹Cited by Chuck Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 243.

²Edmund Clowney, "The Politics of the Kingdom," *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 1979), p. 306.

³ Quoted in Eugene Cho, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2020), pp. 182-183.