

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE CHRISTIAN AND THE GOVERNMENT

Romans 13:1-7

Twice in my life I have had the high honor and privilege of giving the opening prayer in the U.S. Congress – once for the House of Representatives (October 1, 2002) and once for the Senate (April 27, 2004). It was both intimidating and pretty cool to stand in the chamber of the House of Representatives and offer a prayer from the exact spot where the President of the United States stands when he gives the annual State of the Union address.

It actually wasn't as big a deal as it may sound. On both occasions, though they were officially in session, not many members of either the House or the Senate were present when I offered the prayer – probably only about ten percent of the members in each case. That was kind of a let-down. However, on the day I prayed in the House of Representative, I was graciously introduced by a Congressman from Indiana named Mike Pence (now the Vice President of the United States), whose son Michael was a classmate and friend of our son Nate at Immanuel Christian School.

I don't know how seriously the leaders and members of the House and Senate take these daily prayers, or prayer in general, but I'm glad this long tradition of beginning each day with prayer when Congress is in session continues, though I do wish these prayers, and the prayers of the American people for our elected leaders, would sometimes result in different, better, wiser actions by the Congress. I suspect you do, too.

I thought of these experiences in reflecting on Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1-7 on the relationship between the Christian and the government – between followers of Jesus Christ who proclaim Him King and Lord of all, and the state, whose claims and requirements of its citizens or subjects sometimes come into conflict with our allegiance to the Lord Jesus. Depending on the kind of government a person happens to live under, the teaching in this passage can be hard to accept and put into practice.

Not that it was so easy in Paul's day. Paul wrote the letter to the Romans from Corinth around 57 AD. He was on his way back to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his third missionary journey, carrying a contribution from the churches in Greece to assist the members of the Jerusalem church who were in need. After that, he planned to go to Rome and visit the believers there on his way to Spain (Romans 15:23-29). It didn't work out the way Paul hoped. He was arrested shortly after arriving in Jerusalem and remained in custody for more than two years before appealing his case to Caesar, prompting Festus, the Roman governor in Judea, to ship him off to Rome (Acts 24-25).

As Paul's experience confirms, living as a follower of Jesus under Roman rule was no picnic. There was sustained opposition from Jews who wanted to destroy the Jesus movement. It was that Jewish opposition in Jerusalem that led to Paul's arrest and imprisonment there. But the first major wave of persecution by the Romans was yet to come. Nero, the Roman emperor

from 54-68 AD, was no fan of the burgeoning Christian movement. Around 64 AD, Nero turned up the heat on the followers of Jesus. He deliberately caused a massive fire in Rome for which he blamed Christians, and proceeded to put hundreds – maybe thousands – of Christians to death in the next few years, including both the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter.

The question Paul addresses directly here in Romans 13 is this: What is the Christian's proper relationship to the civil government? How are we as Christians to understand the nature of the authority of the state? What is to be our attitude as followers of the Lord Jesus toward the government under which we live, toward those who are in authority over us?

What Paul does *not* say is that it all depends on what kind of government you have. He does *not* say that it depends on whether your rulers are just and honorable. We'll come back to what Paul doesn't say in a little bit.

First, though, notice what he *does* say. He lays down a foundational principle in verse 1: "Everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities" (NIV). "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (ESV). In other words, no one is above or outside the law. No one is free to simply ignore the authority of the state, or to violate the law just because you feel like it. Since Paul is writing this to Christian believers, you have to understand him to be saying that your relationship to Jesus Christ does not exempt you from the requirement to submit willingly to the laws of the state. *Everyone* is to be subject to the governing authorities. *Everyone*.

Why? Paul gives two reasons. The first is that government has been established by God, and there is no governing authority except what God has established (13:1b-1c). Like marriage, the family, and the church, the state has been ordained and established by God to serve positive purposes. Given the brokenness of the world and the sinfulness of the human heart, government is necessary to establish justice, to preserve order, to protect citizens, and to promote the general welfare, however imperfectly, for everyone under its governing authority.

So, we are to be subject to the governing authorities because they have been instituted by God for our good. There is a second reason, which we see in verse 2: To rebel against the government and its authority is to rebel against God's appointed instrument of justice, since God is the One who has instituted government and given it its authority. To resist or undermine the authority of a lawfully-instituted government is to oppose God. And those who rebel in this way will face the consequences of their actions. They will, Paul says, "bring judgment on themselves" (13:2b).

This assumes, does it not, that the government in question is good, that the governing authorities are trustworthy, that the people in charge are just and wise and concerned for the common good? In cases and places where this is true, what Paul says makes sense, doesn't it? But what if it is not the case? Rome was not favorably disposed to the Christian movement when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans. The political climate was not particularly welcoming to or supportive of the followers of Jesus. And, as I have already suggested, things would soon get much worse when Nero turned his murderous, maniacal wrath on the Christians in Rome and elsewhere in the empire.

So, the question becomes: What if you find yourself under the rule of a tyrant or a dictator who cares little, if at all, about the well-being of his subjects? What if you live under the rule of an evil, oppressive government? Or, what if you live in a land where anarchy reigns? Where lawlessness rules? What if those in authority are evil, or just incompetent? What then?

We have had – and survived – bad Presidents at different times in our nation’s history, though we have had to pay the price. James Buchanan (1857-61) comes to mind, as do Franklin Pierce (1853-57) and Andrew Johnson (1865-69) among others. On the world stage, history is littered with tyrants who have perpetrated unspeakable evils upon their peoples or the world. Nero is but one of several Roman emperors who ruled with an iron fist and a cruel heart. In the last 100 years, one need only think of murderers like Stalin in Russia, Hitler and the Nazis in Germany, Mao Zedong in China, Pol Pot in Cambodia, Fidel Castro in Cuba, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Bashar Assad in Syria, Moammar Ghadafi in Libya, and Osama bin Laden, along with a succession of leaders of terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. I haven’t even mentioned repressive regimes like South Africa under apartheid, or Iran or North Korea, or other places in the world where it is dangerous or illegal or both to be a follower of Jesus. Can you imagine what that must be like?

How does Paul’s instruction apply if you live in Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union under communist rule, or any of these other oppressive governments where Christianity is either outlawed or taken over and twisted by the state to serve its own ends? What then? What about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German pastor and teacher, who took part in a failed conspiracy to kill Hitler? Was he justified in doing so? What would Paul say about that?

Does Paul’s teaching in Romans 13 apply universally to every person and every government without exception? Are there any exceptions to the rule(s) he lays down here?

The answer, I believe, is no, it is not a universal absolute, and yes, there are – and must be – exceptions. Governments of all kinds have an inherent tendency to assume powers that are not rightly theirs and that infringe upon the rights of the people. When that happens, the people have the right to protest and to seek redress of their grievances. In totalitarian regimes, where there is little if any freedom to pursue this course of action, the result, more often than not, is the silencing and punishment of those who dare to challenge the status quo. In even the most open, egalitarian society such as ours in the U. S., there is always the possibility of negative consequences for those who rock the boat.

But we know from the Bible itself that there are limits to the authority of the state. Here are a few examples from the Bible in which God’s people knowingly refused to obey those who were in authority.

- In Exodus 1, which records the birth of Moses in Egypt, we read that the Hebrew midwives refused to kill newborn Hebrew baby boys, as decreed by Pharaoh. It was an act of civil disobedience.
- In Daniel 3, Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey the edict of Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar that all of his subjects were to bow down

and worship a golden image of the king. It was an act of civil disobedience that got them thrown into a fiery furnace. But the Lord was with them and delivered them through it.

- In Daniel 6, Daniel himself got caught in a trap laid by government officials who were envious of him and his power. Daniel refused to obey King Darius' decree that no one should pray to any god or man except himself for a period of 30 days. Daniel continued to pray to the Lord, as was his daily practice, and he ended up being thrown into the lions' den for it. But the Lord protected and delivered him as well. This, too, was an act of civil disobedience.
- In the New Testament, in Acts 4 and 5, the leaders of the fledgling church in Jerusalem refused to obey when the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, banned preaching in the name of Jesus. They said; "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). When they left the Sanhedrin, the Bible says, they rejoiced "because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (of Jesus). Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:41-42). It was, again, an act of civil disobedience.

The operative principle here, of course, is that when the laws or requirements of the state come into conflict with the commands of God, we must stand with the apostles and godly men and women throughout history and choose to obey God rather than men. Here is how John Stott says it: "We are to submit (to the state) right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. If the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit; to disobey the state in order to obey God" (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 342).

We have to be careful, though. In the same way that Paul's instruction must not be used to justify or rationalize abuses of governmental power, we dare not use the principle that obedience to God trumps obedience to the state to excuse ourselves when we find obeying the law to be personally inconvenient or undesirable. Or when a law that we don't like is passed by a leader(s) we don't respect or trust.

This, of course, is how a lot of Americans today view President Trump. They don't like him personally. They don't like his personality. They don't like his policies. They don't like his style. They don't like his hair. They take offense at things he has said. Rightly so, in some cases. And so, they are unequivocally opposed to him and anything he purposes to do. They have labeled themselves "the resistance" and are determined to fight him to the end, no matter what he does or says or proposes to do.

Many Americans viewed President Obama in much the same way. They didn't like him personally. They didn't like his policies. They didn't like his social agenda or his foreign policy. They resolved to oppose him and his administration at every turn, and couldn't wait for his term to end.

We are a divided nation. (How is that for a profound thought?) The political atmosphere in our land is toxic. Though the number is small, there have been well-publicized occasions in

which individual Christians in our nation have been forced to choose between obedience to the law of the state and conscientious obedience to God. But few, if any, of us have found ourselves in a situation where we have had to make that kind of choice. Having a President you don't like or a party in power whose priorities and policies are at odds with yours does not rise to the level of justifying willful disobedience to the governing authorities.

I read several sermons on this topic of "The Christian and Government" this week. One I found particularly helpful was preached by Bryan Wilkerson, pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, MA. Some of you are familiar with that church. In discussing the Christian's proper relationship to the government, Wilkerson says that "Christians are to cooperate with their government wherever possible, challenge their government whenever necessary, and pray for their government at all times" (Bryan Wilkerson, "Thinking Biblically About Government", [www. PreachingToday.com](http://www.PreachingToday.com)).

Cooperate. In other words, be good citizens. Three times in these verses, Paul refers to those in authority as "God's servant" (13:4a, c) or "ministers of God" (13:6). Twice in verse 4 he uses the word *diakonos*, from which, as you know, we get the word "deacon." In verse 6, he uses the word *leitourgoi*, from which we get the words "liturgy" and "liturgist," having to do with the form and functions of worship or service offered to God. When government fulfills its divinely-intended purpose, it acts as a servant or representative of God in overseeing the public life of the people. And, as Wilkerson says: "If government is God's servant, then it only makes sense for us to cooperate with government whenever possible, which typically means obeying the laws of the land, paying taxes, voting in elections, serving in the armed forces when called upon, and generally contributing to the well-being of society. But there's more to it than just keeping the rules. (It calls for us to have) a positive and respectful attitude toward government, even when we don't agree with that government" (Wilkerson, *ibid.*).

To this end, says Paul, we are obligated to pay taxes, fees, and tolls to the government, and to show respect and honor to those in positions of authority. As Jesus said in response to a question from Pharisees who were trying to trap Him: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Fulfill your obligations as good citizens. Do not ignore them. But do not neglect your allegiance to God. It comes first. *He* comes first. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and trust Him to take care of the rest (Matthew 6:33).

Whenever possible, cooperate with the government. Show respect to your leaders. If you can't bring yourself to respect the person(s) in office, show them the respect due their office. Whenever necessary, challenge. Protest. But do it peacefully and respectfully. Engage in acts of non-violent civil disobedience against unjust laws, following the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. and millions more in the civil rights movement.

And pray at all times. Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2: "I urge, 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" (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Whether you like them or not, there is never a time when it is not time to

pray for our leaders. It was true when Barack Obama was President. It is just as true now that Donald Trump is President. It has always been true and will always be true.

One last thing to take away from this passage today: Just because the rulers and governing authorities that exist have been established by God does not mean that God approves of the actions of every ruler. The mystery of God's sovereignty is somehow wrapped up in this. It does not mean that God endorses the policies or practices of every government. The fact that every ruler or governing authority has been instituted by God does not mean that a particular ruler or government or nation is carrying out God's will. It is true that God sometimes uses pagan kings and nations to carry out His will, especially to chastise His people, but sometimes to show them (us) mercy. He has done so in the past, and He will undoubtedly do so again. But never make the mistake of thinking that God approves of the actions of the leaders of any nation who show themselves so be anything but ministers of God for the common good.

Friends, let us consider ourselves blessed to live here in America. Because we *are* blessed. Despite all its imperfections and all the ways this nation has rebelled against the righteous and sovereign rule of God, this is still the place to which millions of people yearn to come, in order to live in freedom and peace.

Whether you are a Democrat, Republican, Independent, Libertarian, or Socialist, whether you are conservative, moderate, or progressive, this word from God is meant for you: "Every person must submit to the governing authorities" – except when to obey those in authority requires you to disobey God. When the government forbids you to do what God commands, or commands you to do what God forbids, the choice is clear. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.