

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(April 21, 2013)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

God - and Government

(Romans 13:1-7)

Study #22

Introduction: Government at its best...

Kathy and I recently watched the movie, “Lincoln” with Daniel Day Lewis and Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones, and others. It is a riveting movie.

“Lincoln” details the final chapter of the president’s life, zeroing in on his efforts to drive the 13th Amendment - the amendment that abolished slavery - through a reluctant Congress.

The movie left me with some mixed emotions.

On the one hand, of course, I was moved to be reminded that following the devastation of the Civil War, our nation had the decency to put an end to the atrocity of slavery. On the other hand, I was uneasy with the process that brought about that excellent result.

It brought to my mind the line attributed (probably incorrectly) to the 19th century Prussian Prime Minister, Otto von Bismarck, “*Laws are like sausages. The more we know about how they are made, the less we like them.*”¹

Governments make laws, sometimes sloppily and slimily. Governments do all sorts of other things, too.

¹ More literally, *Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made.*”

Occasionally, governments rise to the occasion of doing the right thing. More rarely, they do the right thing the right way. Even more rarely, they do the right thing the right way for the right reasons.

Today you and I are going to think about government. Thinking about government, about the state, is important. But it is also tricky. It’s tricky to think about government because (separate from our understanding of the Bible) we all have opinions about government, and we all don’t think exactly alike when it comes to government.

But it’s also tricky to think about government because to think about government is to think about the use (and the potential abuse) of power.

Government is about power.² And if it is true that “*all power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely*”³ then we should be careful today.

But the topic of government is our theme this morning. As we are working our way through the book of Romans together on Sunday mornings, it so happens that Romans 12 is followed by Romans 13. And Romans 13 speaks to the theme of government.

See, the beauty of studying an entire book of the Bible together (by way of expository preaching) is that we, as a church, are exposed to the whole counsel of God and not just to the hobby horses or one man or of the leadership.

Given my natural bent, I might go a very long time without speaking about government from the pulpit. But here it is, bigger than life, in Romans 13. There is no avoiding it, and we’ll tackle the theme head on.

Over the course of the next half hour I certainly will not say all that could be said about government. My hope and prayer, though, is that what I do say will be true to what Scripture teaches, and that it will be clear and helpful to you.

² America’s first president, George Washington said bluntly, “*Government is not about reason, it is not about eloquence. It is about force. Like fire, it is a dangerous and fearful master.*”

³ Attributed to Great Britain’s Lord Acton.

Now we believe that Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome from the sea port city of Corinth. Most scholars are agreed that Romans addresses basic Christian beliefs more thoroughly than any of Paul's other writings. Romans is the book to turn to if you want to develop a truly Christian worldview.

It was the letter Paul wrote when he had the chance to reflect and the time to think it all through.⁴ In Romans, Paul explains the Gospel, describes the inner workings of life in the Spirit, explores the sovereignty of God, and gives instruction as to how to lead a God-honoring life.

He has just spoken to us about how to live as a part of a vibrant community of faith. (Romans 12) Now he pauses, takes a deep breath, and tells us how a member of that faith community is to interact with the secular state.

His first comments are blunt, stark, and straight to the point.

Gaining Insight: The Nature of Human Government (vv. 1-2)

The Legitimate Authority of Government (v. 1)

Christians are to submit to government (v. 1a)

[1a] Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.⁵

That's a mouthful, especially when we remember to whom Paul was writing.

He was writing to people who were living in the hub of the most powerful empire of his day. This letter was written to people living under the thumb of imperial Rome. And THESE Christians were to submit to their governing authorities.

⁴ Other letters reflect haste. The spirit of his letter to the churches of Galatia is fiery and passionate. His short letter to his friend Philemon seems like a quick note jotted off to a friend.

⁵ Some who read these words have wondered if there was a sense of urgency about this topic of church-state relations for the Roman Christians of Paul's day, in light of official persecution they may have been suffering, and in light of the more intense suffering that was soon to come their way.

For the last two thousand years, regardless of the form of government under which they have lived, Christians have understood that this verse applies to them. It obviously applies to us, today.

By "**authorities**" Paul refers to civil governments. You and I are not free from the obligation to be subject to the state. Our faith does not grant immunity from the call to be in subjection. Rather, our faith requires us to submit.

Now, in a few minutes, we'll explore together some of the "*so what's*" that go along with the idea of being "**subject to**" (or "**submissive to**") the government. But for now, let's continue with the passage, making a few observations as we go along.

Paul next assures us of something having to do, not with the authority of the state, but the authority of God.

There is no authority except God (v. 1b)

[1b] For there is no authority except from God

Before anything else was, God was the first power. His power created all there is, from the galaxies to the butterflies, animate and inanimate alike. He is the energizing power of everything seen and unseen, the AUTHORITY behind and above every other authority.

Therefore, all human power, wherever it is exercised, is derived and delegated, not inherent, not intrinsic. That applies to authority and power in the home, in the church, at work, and in the state.

It's important that we remember this. Any government's power is derived from God, not intrinsic to itself.⁶

Then, Paul makes a statement not only about the actual authorities with which he and the church in Rome were dealing (namely, the Roman Emperor and his representatives), but also about all civil authorities that have existed throughout time.

⁶ Our Declaration of Independence states that government derives its legitimacy from "*the consent of the governed.*" In a certain, limited, man-centered way, this is true. But Romans 13 speaks to a deeper reality. All authority is from God.

Governments are established by God (v. 1c)

[1c]...and those which exist are established by God.

One of the most controversial things I will say this morning (although it is Paul who says it) is that at some level and in some sense, God has established the governments that exist and that have existed throughout history.

God was behind the founding of the United States of America. Most of us Americans usually think that's OK. Brace yourself. God is also behind the establishment of any other nation you can think of.

The Old Testament is filled with statements affirming this truth.⁷ The prophet Daniel says,

[2:21] And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings;

Here, Paul says the same thing. God raises up nation states to fulfill His purposes in the world.

This is not to say that God is responsible for the atrocities committed by the nations He establishes. God did not cause the horrors of Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, or Mao's China. He wasn't the force driving American slavery or our treatment of Native Americans.

God establishes governmental authorities. Those authorities have a stewardship to fulfill, and some do better at fulfilling their God-ordained stewardship than others.

When Paul said what he does here about authorities being established by God, we might think that he's looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, and that he's had only had pleasant experiences with the Roman authorities. Not so.

He wrote these words not long after he was mistreated by Roman authorities at Philippi (See Acts 16).

⁷ See also Genesis 12:2; 17:12; Deuteronomy 28:36; 32:21; 1 Kings 11:14, 23; Psalm 75:7; Isaiah 5:26; 10:6; Jeremiah 5:15; Daniel 2:21; Amos 6:14

When he wrote Romans, the emperor in power was a guy named Nero.⁸ Rome was only a few years away from experiencing the worst of Nero's madness.

And when Nero's full insanity struck, the apostle Peter wrote much the same things that Paul writes here, ***[1 Peter 2:13] Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, [14] or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.***

As hard as it may be for us to swallow, the Bible's command to be subject to governing authorities is not tied to only those governments that are friendly to Christians.

Rome was pagan through and through. It was brutal and sometimes unjust. Paul still acknowledged it as a God-ordained ***"authority."*** Christians were therefore to be subject to it.

So here's a summary of what I believe Paul has said to this point:

Summary: Biblical thinking about the state...

- One, no one has ever exercised ruling authority unless God has, at least for a time and, in some sense, set him or her up to rule.
- Two, governing authorities, in some way, serve the purposes of God.
- Three, God, in His Son, Jesus Christ, the risen King of kings and the Lord of lords, reigns sovereign over all earthly kings and kingdoms, lords, and lordships.⁹

⁸ During the first five years of his reign, Nero was aided by two good assistants (Burrus and Seneca), who promoted a model government. When they passed, Nero degenerated into the monster who committed the atrocities for which he is known.

⁹ Those governing authorities that best reflect the purpose for which God established them will remain and be blessed. When those authorities violate God's purpose for them past a certain point, they will be set aside. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, one of the most famous and vocal Russian dissidents, spoke about the necessity of God's judgment of the Soviet Union for her atrocities. Writing in ***The Gulag Archipelago***, he noted that God may often reserve judgment of an evil man or woman for a time after this life. But the judgment of nations must take place in real time history.

Notice that Paul's words aren't restricted to any special type or style of governmental rule. He certainly doesn't suggest here what is the "best" form of government.¹⁰ And if he did I seriously doubt if he would mention a participatory government like a democracy or a republic.¹¹

What he says here applies to any form of government. God is sovereign over them all; God has, in some sense, established them all; Christians are to be subject to them all.

And if God has established them, then opposing them is a very bad idea. To oppose government is to oppose an institution to which God has delegated authority.

The Peril of Opposition to Government (v. 2)

[2] Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Rebellion against human government is rebellion against God's order. And rebellion will bring "***condemnation.***"

Yep. Paul is right. Rebel against government, break the state's law, and you'll get condemned.

And here, the Bible is referring to thieves who spend time in jail, jaywalkers who have to pay a fine, and murderers who receive a death sentence.

And just to be clear, I don't think that by "***resists authority***" and "***oppose***" Paul is speaking about someone who criticizes their government.¹²

¹⁰ If pressed, he would probably tell us that any government is better than no government (anarchy).

¹¹ Remember, Paul's only experience was with imperial, dictatorial, Rome. My suspicion is that, given an option, Paul would say that a benevolent dictatorship is the preferred form of government. It would be hard to argue with that perspective. After all, when God finally sets up a government - during what we call The Millennium - Jesus will rule alone, a true benevolent monarch.

¹² When we disagree with elected or appointed officials over substantive issues, there is the power of the pen, the power of the ballot box, the power of the phone,

Jesus Himself felt free to criticize not only the Jewish leaders, but also the Roman ruler, Herod Antipas, referring to him as "***that fox,***" (Luke 13:32). Paul accused one of the members of a Jewish grand jury of being a "***whitewashed wall.***" (Acts 23:3)

What is in view here is someone who breaks civil law and reaps a punishment. We oppose the state at our peril.

So, in sovereignly directing history, one of the instruments God has chosen to use is government. We get that.

Paul builds on his thoughts about the *nature* of government to now speak to the proper *function* of government.

Gaining Understanding: The Proper Role of Government (vv. 3-4)

[3] For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; [4] for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Government's Role as Protector

I don't think that Paul would have ever argued that Rome was flawless in its judgments. He knew that it sometimes violated justice as it regulated life throughout the Empire. He also certainly knew, though, that the influence of Rome brought great benefits.

The same is true for us in our own day. It is a benefit to have a government. Not beneficial without exception, but generally beneficial.

For the most part, responsible, obedient people aren't hassled by the government. I know that there are exceptions to this, and when those exceptions happen, they are tragic.

and the power of the petition, and the power of prayer. Criticism of the government or of its policies should be aimed at improving and not subverting the state.

But Paul is, generally speaking, correct. If you keep the law, government is (usually) a minister of God to you for good.

Thinking along these lines we are drawn to recognize the benefits of the state.

We owe the state our public transportation system, along with our electric service and water and gas utilities. The armed forces protect us from hostile enemies beyond our border. The police protect us from violence in our own city. Firefighters are front-line servants. There is a social safety-net in place that protects the weak and vulnerable. Laws are passed by the government, the overwhelming majority of which are good laws.

In short, the state provides for us citizens what we would have a hard time doing on our own. And, since the alternative is anarchy (a non-system in which nobody wins), we - and the bulk of people throughout history - are blessed indeed by the institution of government.

Paul saw the Roman state in his own day as God's appointed means of protecting his world from chaos. In fact, it was the three hundred years long *pax Romana* - enforced by Roman military might! - that gave him and other Christians the freedom to spread the word and to obey the Great Commission.

That is not to say that the Roman system or our system or any system is perfect. They aren't. No government fully carries out the proper function for which God ordained civil government in the first place. Not the USA. Not Canada or Mexico. Not Cuba or Israel.

Still, there is no doubt about it. The state brings blessing to law-abiding citizens AND to the church.¹³

The corollary to this function of the state, of course, is that it has the God-ordained right and responsibility to punish those who transgress.

¹³ There are glaring exceptions to the rule, of course. We can think of regimes in which the innocent are exploited, not protected. But the God-ordained function of government is first and foremost to provide a stable and secure environment for its law-abiding citizens.

What God forbids to the Christian - vengeance (Romans 12:17-21), Paul says He allows to the state with the words, "*it does not bear the sword for nothing.*"

Government's Role as Punisher

It is my understanding that the biggest part of Paul's point here has to do with government's treatment of criminals, in everything from levying fines all the way to capital punishment.¹⁴

Police forces protect from criminal activity. Jails and prisons house, temporarily or permanently, those who violate law.

Tragically, we may punish unjustly from time to time (it is horrible when that happens!) and our penal system may need overhauling, but government has the authority from God - even the mandate - to punish the guilty.

Paul is right. Rulers are a cause of fear to those who do evil!¹⁵

So, God has ordained governments to rule society by protecting those who seek to live within the law and by punishing those who break the law.¹⁶

As we head for the homestretch this morning we come to the "*so what*" for you and me. Here, Paul spells out our responsibilities to those authorities.

¹⁴ My point here is not to argue for or against capital punishment, but to make clear that government has the right to punish those who harm society.

¹⁵ By "the sword" Paul may also be referring to the military. The armed forces of Rome protected Roman cities and citizens from foreign enemies. And so today, the Armed Forces of the United States protects us from being attacked. Once attacked, the military retaliates against our enemies.

¹⁶ "*The proper function of a government is to make it easy for the people to do good, and difficult for them to do evil.*" (Daniel Webster, The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster: Diplomatic Papers and Miscellaneous Letters. As I understand it, these are the two explicit purposes of government. For a government to take on additional tasks would not be anti-biblical, but it is not the explicit reason for which God established the state.

Gaining Appreciation: Government's Rights (and limits!) (vv. 5-7)

Government Deserves Our Submission (v. 5)

[5] Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

We've already seen the words "*be in subjection*" (or "*submit*") in this passage. Now, let's explore a little bit more what Paul had in mind when he used those words with respect to our relationship to government.

The subject of submission is a major theme in the New Testament. It is sometimes a hotly debated theme.

Submission is a hallmark of healthy relationships. All Christians are to submit to one another. (Ephesians 5:21) Wives are to submit to husbands. (Ephesians 5:22) Slaves are to submit to masters/employees to employers. (Titus 2:9) Church members are to submit to their elders. (Hebrews 13:17) Christians are all to submit to Jesus.

Here, Paul says that citizens are to submit to the state.¹⁷

The Bible's perspective on submission is that it is a strong, intelligent, and creative response. There is nothing weak or "*door mat-ish*" about it.

And, submission does not, technically, mean "*obey*." Submission is often much more challenging than rote obedience.

When we are given the assignment to submit in a relationship to a person or to an institution, it means that we are to put our strengths, our resources, and whatever influence we have at the disposal of that other, for the other's benefit and blessing.

The wife is to act with submissive strength to encourage her husband to achieve his potential as a man. The employee submits by helping his employer run a more efficient business. Church members submit to elders to enhance the ministry of the church.

¹⁷ See also Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13.

And citizens who submit to their government put their resources, strengths, and influence to work to enhance the state's capacity to protect the obedient and to punish the rebellious.

This call to submit to governmental "*authority*" is not a call to an uncritical, blind obedience to the state's every command. Paul would never say that we are supposed to obey human government *absolutely*.

If our state's laws ever command us to violate God's Law, we will joyfully side with God over man! As we have already seen, government's power is derived, delegated power. Only God's power is inherent and absolute.¹⁸

But, subjection - a commitment to use our every resource to bless - is still required. And that submission touches every aspect of our lives.

It speaks to how we speak about our government and our rulers - respectfully even when we disagree. It speaks to how we obey the laws of the land, even ones we may disagree with, even when no one is watching.

It even speaks to how we deal with and view the IRS...

It may be especially fitting that we have come to this text so close in time to April 15 because, yes, Paul actually mentions taxes. This routine and mundane part of life as a citizen is cast in these verses as a part of our willing subjection to governing authorities.

Government has the right to levy taxes and we are obliged to pay them.

¹⁸ In Acts, Paul himself resisted a Roman official's command to leave prison secretly because he judged that he had been treated unjustly by the Philippian civil authorities. (Acts 16:35-40) Daniel's friends refused to bow down before Nebuchadnezzar's image. Moses' parents refused to bring their infant son to Pharaoh to be killed. Other examples from the Bible and from church history could be added to demonstrate that God's people have willingly disobeyed man's laws when to have obeyed them would have required that they disobeyed God's laws.

Government Deserves Our Tax Money (vv. 6-7a)

[6] For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. [7a] Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom

The Christians in Rome were to pay their taxes. Christians in San Antonio are to pay our taxes.¹⁹

These words neither limit nor justify a particular form or level of taxation. They simply affirm that we are, in general, to pay our taxes as a demonstration of our submission to God and to His order.

I know. Your federal, state, and local taxes - and mine - go to some causes that we do not wish to support. That has always been the case. I'm certain it was in Paul's day. We are still to pay our taxes.

Do you disagree with our current tax code? Do you want to see tax reform? Me, too. The fact that our current tax code is, technically speaking, a "mess," doesn't free us from the obligation to pay our taxes.

Have you read on the Internet about ways to get out of paying taxes, about how paying taxes are unconstitutional? Listen instead to the Bible. Pay your taxes.

Are you tempted to argue that you are exempt from paying taxes because you are a citizen of heaven? Resist that temptation. Pay your taxes.

And with that, we come to the end of Paul's brief discussion of government. I'll summarize in just a minute.

But tacked on to the end of his comments about the state, our submission to it, and dealing with the IRS and the Bexar County Tax Assessor-Collector, he adds a final thought.

¹⁹ And here Paul grants us the grace of perspective. He tells us that the real reason for paying taxes is that we understand the place of civil authority in God's plan. They are servants of God (even if they don't know it.)

Government Does NOT Deserve Our Fear (v. 7b)

[7] Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; FEAR TO WHOM FEAR; HONOR TO WHOM HONOR

Some who read these words think that these last two phrases encourage us to "*fear*" higher government officials and to "*honor*" the less lofty governmental rulers.

And certainly in a context in which the focus has been on the Christian's relationship to the state, it would be reasonable that Paul might end with instructions to fear and honor our rulers.

But I don't believe that is at all what is going on here.

Think back to what Jesus said when He addressed the theme of paying taxes to Caesar. He told His disciples and those who were questioning Him, "*By all means pay Caesar's tax. The tax money belongs, rightfully, to him. Give Caesar the money.*"

But then Jesus went on to highlight something profound: *[Mark 12:7] "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."*

Roman money has Caesar's image stamped on it. Pay him his money. People have the image of God stamped on them. Give yourself to God!

Back in Romans 13:4, Paul told us what we already know, that those who rebel against the government enter into an adversarial relationship with the state and rightly live in fear. That makes sense.

Here, though, we find a general command to fear. We are called to fear, not because we've done something wrong, but because it is right to fear.

And the only appropriate fear for law-abiding, submissive believers is the fear that is commended to us over and over again in the Bible - the fear of God that takes away all other fears.

Isn't it just like Paul to come full circle and even in a section dealing with government, call us to reverence and worship of Almighty God?

Conclusion:

What do we learn from God's Word today about our relationship to government?

First, in terms of the point of government.

- It is a God-ordained institution.
- It exists to promote what is good.
- It exists to punish evil.

Second, in terms of our responsibility toward government:

- We are called to submit to governing rulers.
- We are called to loyal support of its needs by paying taxes.

Third, while we do have an obligation to obey the authorities, we have a higher loyalty to the Power that established those authorities in the first place.

And there is one more thing we can - and must! - do. We pray.

[1 Timothy 2:1] First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, [2] for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

Brethren, let us pray...