

The Authority of God Romans 13:1-7

Be subject to the governing authorities? Are you kidding me? How many headlines have we seen just this week that have cast doubt on the honesty or the integrity of so many of our elected officials? How can we trust them, let alone honor them?

Well, believe it or not, Paul was actually in a much worse situation that we are. After all, he lived in the Roman Empire, and for all its historic glory, in Paul's day it had become really nothing more than what we would call a military dictatorship. The Caesars ruled because they were commanders of the Roman legions, and their claim to power rested solely on that basis.

Worse yet, the same governmental system that Paul encouraged his readers to obey would be responsible not too many years afterward for the first great persecutions of the Christian Church. Paul probably wrote this letter during the early years of the reign of the Emperor Nero. But after the city of Rome burned in A.D. 64, Nero would blame the Christians for the fire and would go on to unleash the worst sort of persecution on them. He would burn Christians alive. He would order them wrapped in animal skins and thrown to the lions, to be devoured while crowds looked on. This man, the Kim Jong Un of his day, was the emperor to whom Paul said his readers must be subject.

No, Nero probably wasn't that bad at the time Paul wrote these words. But his message is clear – if Paul could urge his readers to be subject to the whims of a military dictator, there's no wiggle room for us to claim that we should only obey good and godly governments. We can't just choose to obey only those authorities that represent our interests. No, we must obey the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, the elected and the despotic.

And why? The second half of verse 1 tells us. If we believe that God is the sovereign Lord of all the earth, we have to believe that He is in charge of picking who rules the various kingdoms on the earth. Nero may have been crazy, and Nero may have been cruel, but the only reason Nero was emperor of the Romans was because somehow that was part of God's plan. Thus, Paul

draws the only conclusion possible: resisting those whom God has appointed is tantamount to resisting God Himself.

But that doesn't mean that human rulers and governments are off the hook. That doesn't mean citizens are the only ones who have responsibilities. No, in this passage, Paul says that governments are supposed to do some important things for their people. In verse 3, Paul says that governments have the responsibility to praise what is good, and to be a terror to evildoers. Verse 4 goes further along this same line, indicating that one of the principal roles of any government is to act as God's servant to execute divine wrath on evildoers.

But does it make sense for a Christian like Paul to say these things? I mean, didn't Jesus tell us that if someone strikes us on the one cheek, we should turn and let him strike us on the other? Didn't Jesus say that if someone wants to take our shirt, we should let him have our coat also? Didn't Jesus say that we shouldn't resist evil?

Of course Jesus said all these things, and you can look them up in Matthew chapter 5. But in today's passage, Paul makes an important distinction: what it is wrong for an individual to do, it is sometimes right for a government to do.

We Americans understand this instinctively, don't we? We know that it would be wrong for Kate Steinle's father to mete out vigilante justice against Garcia Zerate, the illegal immigrant who killed her. But at the same time, we are horrified that a San Francisco jury would acquit him of murder. We insist that, even in California, the government should do justice.

That is precisely what Paul is saying: while individual Christians may have the responsibility not to resist evil, governments are set in place to do that very thing. It is the government's job to put criminals in jail and to resist invading armies and sometimes even to fight against tyrants in other lands who oppress their own people or the people of neighboring countries. Governments exist to pursue justice.

And that's why it's not wrong for Christians to be soldiers and policemen. If governments are to carry out their God-given responsibilities, if governments

are to protect their citizens and to do justice, they must have soldiers to do the hard work of fighting the necessary battles, or of guarding frontiers. They must have policemen to patrol dangerous city streets. The men and women who undertake these often thankless tasks can thus rightly see themselves as ministers of God as they preserve order, and provide protection and justice.

But, as Paul explains in verse 5, we must obey the government, not just because we are afraid of the soldiers or the policemen, not just because we fear being punished for wrongdoing. No, we must be good citizens, obeying the laws because that's the job God has given us to do. And that's not a job we have just because we don't want to be put in jail. Obeying the laws of the land is a way for us to express our obedience to God as well. We even have to pay our taxes, rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's, as Jesus told us.

And so, if soldiers can see their jobs as ministry, all citizens can see good citizenship in the same way. As Christians obey the laws of the land, we are displaying our obedience to God. Fundamental duties of citizenship, such as telling the truth in courts and before lawfully appointed magistrates, or serving on juries when we are called to do so are ways of expressing our allegiance to God. As you drive the speed limit or pay your taxes, you are doing what God wants you to do.

And so we can see that the sort of attitude that is all too popular today, the attitude that seeks to resist or deny the legitimacy of elected officials, is just not right. The sort of attitude that tries to get around the law, or that makes fun of the law, or that abuses those who job it is to enforce the law, the sort of attitude that glorifies and emulates law-breakers is simply not consistent with the Christian faith. Christians are called to obey the law and to respect lawful authorities.

Ah, but what if the government passes a law that would require me to sin? We've already seen bakers hauled into court because they refused to provide a cake for two people of the same sex who wanted to get married. And we've already seen some Federal judges telling the people of Mississippi that we must allow two men or two women to get married if they want to. So, what if some bureaucrat someday were to come into this church and point his finger at me and

tell me that if I don't participate in those sorts of ceremonies that we'll lose our tax-exempt status? What do I do then?

Well, if we don't specifically find the answer in today's passage, we do find it over and over in the life of Paul and the rest of the apostles. They were told time and time again by various lawful authorities that they should not preach the truth about Jesus. So, what did they do? They preached Christ because that's what God told them to do. And they went to jail because that's what the government told them to do. In both instances, you see, they were subject to higher authorities.

And so yes, Christians may sometimes find ourselves unable to follow certain laws. But if that's the case, we must still be subject to the authorities, submitting ourselves to whatever penalties they prescribe.

Now, all this is a bit much for us Americans to swallow. After all, isn't our whole system of government based on the idea of self-rule? Don't we believe that we have unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? And if we believe that God is sovereign over all rulers, don't we believe that God has given us Americans the right to choose our own representatives to make laws for us? Doesn't being a citizen of a Federal republic give us some ability to run our own lives?

Well, yes it does. Being an American citizen does in fact mean that we have quite a bit of say in how our government operates and in what sorts of laws we live under. But if we look carefully at today's passage, all that means is that we Americans find ourselves on both sides of Paul's political equation. It means we find ourselves bearing the double responsibility of being the ruler and being the ruled at the same time.

For as American citizens, we do in fact hold the sovereign power over this nation. Every few years our politicians have to campaign, traveling across the state or across the country, holding rallies and giving speeches. And the only reason they put themselves through all that trouble is because they can't take office without the permission of the electorate. And that means that, at the end of the day, it is we the people who determine who makes the rules for us.

Yes, voting is a right and a privilege. But given what Paul has told us, it is also an awesome responsibility. For if God is the one who sets up rulers and who pulls them down, that means that when we Americans cast our ballots, we are, in some mysterious way, expressing the will of God. That means that we must learn as much as we can about the process of government and about the views and actions of the various candidates for office. That means we must enter the voting booth with a spirit of reverence, praying and seeking God's will, and trying to cast our votes the way He wants us to.

All that is a lot of responsibility. But we shouldn't let it discourage us. Instead, it should make us even more grateful for what we celebrate during this season of the year. For as we consider our responsibility to be good citizens, obeying the laws of the government, and as we seek to be good electors, choosing carefully the representatives who will make the laws for us, we can rejoice that the ultimate authority, the highest power rests in the hands of a man of perfect integrity, a man of spotless character, King Jesus.

For He didn't always get along with earthly kings either, did He? Soon after He was born, King Herod tried to kill Him. And in spite of His innocence, Pontius Pilate was the one who approved His crucifixion. But by choosing to come into our world, by embracing all sorts of injustice, by submitting to human authorities even to the point of death on a cross, all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Him.

So yes, God has chosen to give us Americans a great deal of freedom. But as we fulfill our responsibilities, as we participate in our government and seek to uphold its laws, let us give our highest allegiance to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And in this season of the year let us rejoice not only that He came to us as a baby in a manger, but that He will come again to bring perfect justice, to make all things right and true.