

All Roads Lead Here: By Whose Authority?
By Jason Huff
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Job 22:21-22; Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-10

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 13:1-10. This is the holy, inerrant, infallible revelation of God to us, His people. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 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 he will commend you. For he 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 of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 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, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

It's not every week as a pastor that I get the opportunity to offend everyone! But today's my chance. I get to talk about both religion and politics and come down in a biblical place that will annoy everyone, including myself. I don't relish this kind of passage because I don't get to win. I like it when people like me – I'm guessing you do too. But there are times on many major issues of our day where we have to hear and obey biblical truth rather than what's popular or what our heart says is right. Today is one of those days.

For the past few weeks, we've been hearing from Paul how our theology plays out practically in our actions. Christ's example points us to a life of love that shows itself in kindness to others, loving our enemies, praying diligently and regularly, and so on. Those passages flowed naturally, one thing to the next. Nobody who's been in a church long would have said “boo” about any of the things we talked about. We might not be able to *do* them very easily, but we aspire to them. We may not love the way we should, but we would like to.

Today's passage might seem like a U-turn, a tangent off in some completely different directions, but it's not. If for the past two weeks we've been looking at how to be godly in a fallen world, today we look at how our attitude and actions towards government either help us in our pursuit of godliness or hold us back from being more Christ-like. It needed to be addressed in Paul's era, and it's still a huge issue today.

So before we go any further, I think we have to make an implied idea Paul has a little more obvious: *our faith informs our politics*. I've heard on many occasions that religion and politics don't mix, but that's not only true, it's impossible not to mix them. In our own country, there was a significant concern back when John F. Kennedy was elected about how much his religion would affect his positions as president. Would he, as a Catholic, be beholden to the pope? While the concern was often made poorly, even in bigoted ways, it was a good question to ask. I've heard multiple congressmen say that they leave their personal beliefs at the door when it comes to their votes; they feel they should vote for their constituents and not their own conscience. What that says to me is that they have no conscience and just want to get re-elected.

Our faith informs our politics. That's not a *should*, something that ought to happen. It's a statement of fact. Our faith informs our politics. Whether you're Christian or Buddhist or Muslim or Jewish or something closer to nothing, what you believe about God and the creation of the universe and what natural moral laws exist or don't exist, all of that affects how we see our government. The government's role, its purposes, its expansion or contraction, what should or should not be on the law as legal or illegal, all of those things come from a faith view.

Now two people might similar faith backgrounds and believe different things about politics. One Christian might value freedom above all things, citing Paul saying, "It is for freedom that you have been set free." They value the freedom to follow Christ so much that they believe in a very limited government, so we're free to act how we choose – to give, to serve, to act as a Christian by choice. Another Christian might look at Jesus' teachings about the poor and believe that government should alleviate poverty. Limited government and expansive government are very different, yet both come from a reading of Scripture, and both political views are formed by faith.

But let's be clear – you cannot separate out faith from politics. If you attempt to do it, you're acting out a different faith, a faith that says that God doesn't have any say (or at least the final say) on political decisions that mirror or break down the law we see in Scripture. And the person with no belief in anything other than science or evolution is still working out of that faith that science has it all right. You can't separate them, so don't even try, and be wary of anyone who says that you can actually do it.

Now let's get to the heart of Paul's teaching. Here's the first one, and it's a doozy – *government authority is established by God, and active violent opposition to the government is a dangerous pushback against God's established order*. So let's look at this in our real-world situation. This means that no matter what we think of him, Trump is our current government authority figure established by God. So was Obama before him and Bush before him and Clinton before him.

And let's not stop there. Every government authority is established by God, so Nazi Germany and Pol Pot's Cambodia and Soviet Russia and Communist China and the Islamic caliphate nonsense? They were established by God too. That should raise our hackles. How can that possibly be? How could the destructive, terroristic, anti-God governments of the world be established by God?

It goes back to the sovereignty of God. God has authority over all things. If we believe in sovereignty, we believe that God allowed all the events that brought those leaders to power. He has the power to topple nations and to set them up, to bring chaos and to bring order. And ultimately, God is the one who will judge them for their actions. Last week, we mentioned how God is the avenger, not us. God is the one who will bring justice on every world leader who does not honor God's ways in dealing with the nation God has given him authority over.

But still, how could this be part of God's will? When we think of God's will, we need to understand that the term "will" means more than one thing. When we speak about historical events, about who has ruled in our world, we're talking about the decretive will of God. This is what God decreed would happen in history. This is not the same as God's preceptive will. That's where God sets down His laws and rules, precepts like "don't steal" and "don't murder." God decrees things will happen that are not part of His preceptive will or His desired will. They happen as a result of human choices that show our fallenness, and God chooses not to intervene. God did not desire Hitler and Stalin ordering the annihilation of millions, but He allowed the natural results of their sin. God lifted them up and brought them down. He will be their judge.

Did Paul know what he was talking about? Absolutely. In Paul's era, Israel was a vassal state of the Roman empire. The Israelites raged against foreign occupation. The Caesars considered themselves "sons of God," requiring everyone to offer incense to them as a sign of loyalty. Rebellion was in the air for decades to put off the brutish influence of Rome and its taxation and its paganism. But what happened when the Israelites did finally rebel in 67AD? By 70AD, 2 million Jews had been killed. Jerusalem and her temple were left in utter ruins. Paul did not want that for them, and he definitely didn't want it for Christians.

World history proves that violent rebellion almost inevitably leads to dictatorship, civil war, and massive casualties. The atrocities of China and Russia started with people's revolutions. The revolutionaries of the French revolution turned on each other. World War I started when Serbian revolutionaries tried to throw off the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The start of the United States is an outlier. Even then, because our Founders were unable to come to terms over the issue of slavery, we eventually had a catastrophic civil war.

Paul tells us that this is not to be the way of the Christ-follower. Now we have to study the wording carefully. In almost every passage where the Greek term "rebels" is used, it refers to violent armed conflict. This is not about being the loyal opposition. It's not about affecting change, especially not in the face of injustice or corruption. It's about taking it upon yourself or your group to violently remove your own government.

Does it mean we never participate in the military or the protection of our country or the liberation of other countries from government authorities? No. In fact, faithful men and women have done just that over the centuries. This Veterans' Day weekend, we honor those who have served us by doing just that. As Christians, we are peacemakers first and foremost, but the government (as Paul says) has the authority from God to bear the sword. That sword is given to defeat evil both internally and abroad. And that sword requires people. It requires faithful men and women who will be used by the government to be that sword to bring about justice.

I'm going to keep us moving because the passage is about far more than that. Here's the next core thought: *government authority exists to protect, to bring justice, and to serve, and for those things, we honor those who serve.* Why should we not live opposed to our government? Because the government exists for the well-being of its people. Now there are corrupt governments, evil governments, and there are times that we must resist them non-violently because to not do so would violate our conscience. Our ancestors in the faith went to an early grave rather than to obey authorities that told them they had to offer incense to the emperor or to stop proclaiming the name of Jesus. But in the vast majority of situations, even with poor governments, authority exists to punish wrongdoing and to serve the common good.

Do we fear the police? Why? Because they're going to pull us over and give us a ticket. Why? Because we're speeding. We're breaking the law. If you've ever been protected by the police, if they've kept you from getting harmed, if they've stopped a crime in progress or brought someone to justice that affected you personally, you often have a different view of the local government authorities.

Paul isn't thinking about speeding, obviously – I don't think you could speed on the back of a camel. But the point is, Christians in his day were leery of Roman soldiers. They had some bad apples, corruption, no doubt. But their primary purpose was to serve the greater good. We are to give their modern counterparts – police, local government officials – honor and respect because their job is ultimately for our benefit. The next time we badmouth someone just for being in politics or law enforcement or whatnot, we need to think twice. We can oppose the problems and bad decisions, but we are to honor the people.

Christians are not free from human law just because we have freedom in Christ from the Old Testament law. We're forgiven – so should we steal knowing it will be forgiven? Can we fight, can we speed, can we harm others and say, "it's all covered by Jesus?" Absolutely not! We are obligated to do what's right by everybody, by following every law except those that violate our Christian conscience to serve God and others faithfully.

Next thought, another fun one: *Christians do not oppose taxes in principle.* Paul sets up the same principle for taxes as he does for giving to the church. Pastors are God's servants to the church and should receive a living for it, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:14. In the same way, governing authorities are God's servants to the larger world and should be paid for it too. If you owe taxes, Paul says, pay them.

We don't like where our taxes go. We disapprove of different projects, who receives the funds, the pork built into the system. And Christians stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves against corruption and injustice. But in Paul's day, taxes were going to Caesar, the self-appointed idol. Of course they opposed paying taxes to an anti-Christ. And yet Paul said, governing authorities should be paid for governing. Pay your taxes.

And here in America, we have great recourses when it comes to taxes. We vote on many taxes and whether or not we want to pay them; the majority rules. Other taxes are set by people we elect, and if we don't like what they're doing with our taxes, well, we vote them out of office and attempt to get someone in who will fix them. It's an imperfect system, but at least we have a say. So simply put – don't cheat Uncle Sam. Nobody likes it, but the biblical mandate is to give the government its due. Because ultimately, it shows that your ethics are beyond reproach, which moves us into the last segment of the passage.

The final idea Paul addresses is this: *the only debt we are to have is to continually love each other as believers, not any debt to the government or to the law.* We have obligations to one another and to the authorities over us. If we don't meet our obligations, it hangs over us like a cloud. It affects the ability we have to show love to each other as well.

Paul says that if we love one another, we will follow the rest of the law. We won't harm others in any way if we truly love them. If you love others, you don't have to worry about all the details because you will have already met them. We always have that debt to fulfill because there is always more love to be shown. There are always opportunities to care for one another.

But then how is that connected to taking care of your debts? Ultimately, if you're indebted to the government – which a lot of Christians were in the first century on their taxes, which were high – or you're indebted to some creditor – which a lot of Christians are today – you are much less able to fulfill your debt to love other people fully.

We live in a society where we buy almost everything based on the promise of our future earnings. Credit card debt, student loan debt, debts for taxes – these all take away our ability to care for those near us. What we pay in interest is gone forever. Sometimes, that money is worth it – but often, it's not. This is not a sermon on finances – that's another topic for another day on a passage more directly about that. But our indebtedness to anyone or anything besides Christ ultimately harms how we can serve Him. You can't volunteer your time to help the homeless or feed the needy when you have to work sixty hour weeks to pay off telephones and televisions.

What's the practical end of this for us? If I were to sum it up, I would say, live in such a way that the government has little notice of you and you have little notice of it. Don't obsess over it. If there are injustices or corruption in the system, if those you vote for have done wrong, do what you can to change the system without resorting to underhanded tactics or thinking that God is no longer in control.

Live in such an upright way according to the law of our land that people will know you have integrity. Show honor and respect to every authority figure in your midst – everyone from the teachers in your kids' schools to the police officer to the councilman to the president. Stay out of financial debt and obligation so you can honor God best with your money. And the best way to do all of these things is to live by the two great commandments – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Do those things, and you will love as a Christian loves without letting government get in the way.