

Sermons through

Romans

God's Ministers

Romans 13:1-7

Part One

Political Tranquility

With Study Questions

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Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-7).

Introduction

As providence would have it, we find ourselves (during this politically charged season in our land) in a portion of Romans addressing our relationship with those in civil and governmental authority. The passage may create as many questions as it answers. Are we to conclude, for example, that since God appoints authorities, we must always view these authorities and their decisions as legitimate?

Are all governments truly a terror to evil? Aren't certain governments rife with evil rather than a terror to evil? Should we expect to receive praise for doing good from the civil magistrate? Did Jesus receive praise for doing good from the authorities? Did Paul? Did the apostles and Christians in the early church and in certain places throughout the world to this very day? Are those governments, then and now, who kill Christians, for merely being Christians, still to be thought of as God's

ministers?

And what is the redemptive message here? Has Paul parenthetically embarked upon the topic of governing authorities without it at all relating to how we are should understand our own salvation?

We will seek to answer these questions and more. But before we bring out the gardening tools of exegesis (critical explanation or interpretation of a text), I would like to (if it doesn't seem too pretentious) share a column I wrote just prior to the election of 2008—an election which also caused great consternation within our borders. Unlike the secular newspaper in which it appeared, I will offer some brief proof texts to buttress certain statements.

Political Tranquility

I entitled the column *Political Tranquility* because I saw, and still perceive, a great need for souls to find some peace in the midst of this tumultuous and unsettling era of political drama. It reads:

The election will be over and we can, at long last, beat our political posters into plowshares. Will you be content regardless of the results? Coping with the elusive equanimity of spirit we hoped would accompany things going our way is a challenge we all must face. In a much more hostile environment, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13).

Battles have their place, but the peace twixt battles must be handled harmoniously and with a serenity which fosters civility — even among those who severely disagree. The hangings in effigy, midnight beatings among neighbors, vandalism and artful digital gesticulations against pedestrian billboards must cease.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19, 20).

Soon (too soon for my taste) the next election will beckon us to once again participate in the process and we will all re-arm – hopefully with only thoughts and arguments, but for now we must resign to our destinies. The election is over and the people have spoken – but from a deeper perspective, God has spoken.

In a primary and ultimate sense, it is God who makes kings and laws.

Daniel answered and said: “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. ²¹ He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding (Daniel 2:20, 21).

Those kings and laws can be a blessing or they can be a curse.

Where now is your king, to save you in all your cities? Where are all your rulers – those of whom you said, “Give me a king and princes”? ¹¹ I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath (Hosea 13:10, 11).

But mere man finds the acme of contentment in knowing there is a Supreme Governor of events who declares the beginning from the end – whose counsel shall stand.

Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹ remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ ¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and

I will do it (Isaiah 46:8-11).

To curse the results of the election is to curse the providence of God. Is this an encouragement to call good evil or evil good? Far from it! Does it mean those who believe in a sovereign God should be passive in the affairs of this world? Certainly not! We should pursue our convictions – be they ecclesiastical, familial or political with zeal and vigor. But we are to be reassured that the world is not left to slapdash, uncertain promiscuities – as Einstein said, “God would not play dice with the universe.” God has given us just what we need – or just what we deserve.

These words may only speak to those who believe in an omnipotent Triune God – who believe God’s hand is not too short to determine election results. If that’s the case, more than half the readers will find some peace, though perhaps hoping for different results in the election. If that half finds some peace, they’ll be better neighbors and everyone benefits.

Peace of mind begins when we realize God is capable of utilizing ungodly people making ungodly decisions (I’m not saying who falls into this category) in His own incomprehensibly divine, just and glorious manner.

The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble (Proverbs 16:4).

For example, I never would have voted for Pilate for governor. Let’s do the ciphering: If not for Pilate there would have been no conviction of Jesus – If there were no conviction of Jesus there would have been no cross – If there were no cross there would be no redemption. God had Pilate right where He wanted him.

So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” ¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:10, 11a).

And through a negligent politician, man was emancipated from sin. I would never have voted for Pilate. But when God revealed His secret plan, I am grateful that His will and not my will was done.

It was this knowledge of God's mighty hand that gave Joseph solace when his brothers threw him in a ditch, sold him into slavery resulting in his imprisonment in Egypt. Their purpose for the treachery was evil but God meant it for good.

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today (Genesis 50:20).

In the first century the followers of Jesus were about to face deadly and torturous religious and political persecution. In that hostile context Jesus said "peace be with you." When the faithful are invited by God to peace, it's not a 'grin and bear it' peace. It's a peace recognizing the invisible hand of a good God behind all of men's decisions – even the evil decisions.

The Apostle Peter calls his readers to honor the king (1 Peter 2:17). The king was Nero, the psychopathic Caesar. Peter wrote this knowing there was a King of kings, a ruler of the kings of the earth (1 Timothy 6:12; Revelation 1:5). Solomon taught that the **"king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it where He wishes"** (Proverbs 21:1).

We all wish things were better. But true, unwavering peace comes through a yielding of our souls to a primary decision-maker who will not apologize for one moment of the history he's ordained. Nothing settles the heart better than knowing there is an able Captain at the helm – a Captain who is not only capable of sailing the ship, but governing the storm.

Those who go down to the sea in ships, Who do business on great waters, ²⁴ They see the works of the Lord, And His wonders in the deep. ²⁵ For He commands and raises the stormy wind, Which lifts up the waves of the sea. ²⁶ They mount up to the heavens, They go down again to the depths; Their soul melts because of trouble. ²⁷ They reel to

and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, And are at their wits' end. ²⁸ Then they cry out to the Lord in their trouble, And He brings them out of their distresses. ²⁹ He calms the storm, So that its waves are still. ³⁰ Then they are glad because they are quiet; So He guides them to their desired haven. ³¹ Oh, that *men* would give thanks to the Lord *for* His goodness, And *for* His wonderful works to the children of men! ³² Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, And praise Him in the company of the elders (Psalm 107:23-32).

I'm hoping I can be that content person – for my neighbor's sake.

Give us a King

One last thought. I wrote that column eight years ago anticipating that the candidate most evangelicals wanted was likely going to lose. The day before the election this year I anticipated that same thing, therefore I concluded a similar message would be appropriate for people struggling with those anticipated results. Yet my guess is most people (certainly not all) in churches today are somewhat giddy with the results. There are probably some good reasons for that and there is nothing wrong with rejoicing when something goes your way. But there is a danger there as well.

Though there is nothing inherently wrong with having a king, Israel was greatly chastised for its desire to have a king. Why would that be? The eighth 1 Samuel records Israel's request for a king. Samuel had become old and made his sons, Joel and Abijah, judges over Israel. But his sons were bad people who took bribes and perverted justice. You see, similar to our land, things weren't going well. But instead of seeking the solution from the Lord, they figured the answer would come from a king; a king who would judge them like all the nations. They thought this is where they would derive their peace. Samuel approached God and God gave His response.

And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but

they have rejected me from being king over them (1 Samuel 8:7).

Having an evil leader will tempt the people to despondency, but having the leader we desire can tempt to misplaced trust and devotion. Earthly kings and their causes can so easily crawl into that sacred place in our hearts which is to belong Christ and Christ only.

Perhaps you're familiar with the demon Screwtape and his counsel to his demon protégé Wormwood on making his subject stumble. They're seeking to determine whether his downfall would best be served by making him a patriot or a pacific-it really doesn't matter. He writes:

Whichever he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the "cause", in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war-effort or of Pacifism. The attitude which you want to guard against is that in which temporal affairs are treated primarily as material for obedience. Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing. Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes, and crusades, matter more to him than prayers and sacraments and charity, he is ours – and the more "religious" (on those terms) the more securely ours. I could show you a pretty cageful down here.

We have been observing a nation of people who have become fully unraveled because their king has failed them and now their despondency controls them. And it will similarly control us, if we allow any earthly leader that place in our hearts which belongs only to the true King; a king who has called us to Himself (Acts 15:14-16), bestows His grace upon us (Acts 5:31), corrects us for our sins (Revelation 3:19), preserves us and

supports us under all temptations and sufferings (Isaiah 63:9), restrains and overcomes all our enemies (1 Corinthians 15:25; Psalm 110:1-2), powerfully ordering all things for his own glory and our good (Romans 8:28; 14:10-11).

Let us be careful to remember there is only one King with the wisdom, goodness and power to entrust our eternal souls. Let us turn to this King now as we prepare for a meal which commemorates His victory for us.

Questions for Study

1. What does it mean to be content? How is it achieved (pages 2-4)?
2. What is the difference between the anger of man and a righteous indignation (pages 3, 4)?
3. How has God spoken in the election? Does this mean we have found favor in His sight? Explain (page 4).
4. What does it mean to curse the providence of God? Does God's sovereignty mean we should be passive or inactive in the affairs of the world (pages 4, 5)?
5. Is God limited by the evil actions of sinful people? Explain (pages 5, 6).
6. From where is true, unwavering peace derived (pages 6, 7)?
7. Why was it wrong for Israel to want a king (page 7)?
8. Having an evil leader can lead to despondency. What is the temptation when we have a leader we prefer (pages 7, 8)?
9. Who is your king and how do you know this (page 8)?

