

Romans: A Christian Response to the 2012 Elections

Romans 13:1-7

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One of my interns pointed out to me that four of the sermons in the Romans series had, for one reason or another, not been recorded, so we had an entire series of messages covering from Romans 1 all the way to Romans 16, but we were missing four of them. And in order to complete that series, which that intern is turning into a series of articles that are being published in *The Madison County Journal*, he suggested that we try and find a place sometime where we could address those passages in Romans. And I looked at the passages and lo and behold they were from Romans 13, 14, 15, and 7. And when I looked at the topics that they covered — Romans 13, which deals with the Christian's relation to government, Romans 14, which deals with Christian freedom, Romans 7, which deals with the Christian's struggle with ongoing sin, and Romans 15, which deals with Paul's priority in ministry — I said, "Well there's a little sermon series wrapped up in those four passages!" It was just a couple of weeks before the election and I already knew folks were praying regularly in the congregation regularly, I had been talking to so many folks here at First Presbyterian Church who had been faithfully, regularly praying for the upcoming elections, I thought, "We're finishing our series in the Psalms and just a week or so after the elections there's going to be a slot on Sunday evening, wouldn't it be a helpful thing for us as a congregation to think through again what Paul tells Christians about how we're to relate to civil government?" And so that's sort of how we got here. And I wanted to make that clear. In fact, next Lord's Day, God willing, we'll be looking at two passages from Romans in the morning and the evening, and then maybe we'll finally get to Romans 15 sometime in the new year because we're going to do a Christmas series on Christ in the Old Testament called, "An Ancient Christmas — The Coming of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament" during the month of December.

But tonight, we have an opportunity to look at Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 7. Now let me say a few other words by way of preface to this particular passage. If we were going to do this passage justice, I would need to spend some time explaining to you four views of the way the church and Christians relate to the state, the government, that have been utilized and deployed and believed over the course of Christian history. They are Erastianism, Constantinianism, they are,

in addition to that, the view of cooperation and the view of theocracy. There's one view that says the church ought to be over the state. There's another view that says the state ought to be over the church. There's another view that says the state establishes the church and the church renders certain responsibilities to the state in order to stay in favor and power. And then there's a view, and this is the view that has been held during most of protestant history, that the church and the state are distinct but that they are actually partners in cooperation for the good of the subjects in a particular realm.

Well I'm not going to address those things tonight. There are excellent discussions of those things in many of the commentaries, including John Stott's little commentary in *The Bible Speaks Today* series on this passage, and I commend them to you. In fact, I may even post them at some point. If I were to discuss this passage in detail I would also need to compare this passage in Romans to other passages in the New Testament which address the issue of the Christian's relation to the state. And though I'm briefly going to do that tonight, there's no way that I can exhaustively do that. You know it was very tempting to me to spend all my time on that kind of introductory material so that I could get out of addressing the really hard questions, but I thought that it would actually be more helpful to you if I addressed some of the hard questions. So I'm not going to do that kind of introductory material, as important and as useful as it is. For instance, when you compare Romans 13 which was written in the 60s, AD 60, and you compare it to, say, the book of Revelation which may have been written in the 90s, there is clearly a more negative view of Rome as a nation and empire in John's depiction in the book of Revelation than you find here in Romans 13. And it raises the question, "What do we make of that?" That's a very legitimate question to study, but I'm not going to spend my time on all the kind of introductory material, as useful and helpful as it might be.

I want to concentrate on three things in particular tonight. First, I want you to appreciate what Paul says in this passage that actually helps Christians precisely in the social and cultural moment that we find ourselves right now. Secondly, I want you to see what Paul says here how it helps us to know how to pray for our country, for our nation, for our government, for the culture, for our community, for our unbelieving fellow citizens. And then third, I want you to see how what Paul says here teaches us how we may engage as Christians in our own day and time with the society and culture in which we live. I want to do those three things together tonight. Before we read Romans 13 verses 1 to 7, let's look to God in prayer and ask for His help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we find Your Word timely at all times, and especially in this season of our national life. We ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful things from Your Word, that You would teach us hearts that are ready to embrace that Word and put it into practice. We pray that You would encourage us by what we study tonight, and we ask that You would enable us to glorify You, not only in our private lives and in our families, but in our civic

life. We want to bear a strong, brave, but also winsome and compelling testimony to Jesus Christ in the way that we conduct ourselves in society. Give us the grace to do that, in Jesus' name, amen.

Now let's hear the Word of God from Romans 13, verses 1 to 7:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, the avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

When I was preparing for the worship services related to the inauguration of our previous governor, Governor Barbour, both his first and his second inaugural, Governor Barbour specifically asked me not to read this passage during his inaugural service, not because he doubted their authority as the word of God, no he affirms every word of the Scripture as God's authoritative, inspired, inerrant Word, but because this passage has a note of calling on Christians to show subjection to civil authorities, and Governor Barbour did not want to send the message that you needed to be in subjection to him. He wanted to send the message that he was responsible to God, that he had particular responsibilities in the exercise of his governing authority to the living God, not that you had a responsibility to be subject to him. He also didn't like the idea of implying that he was some sort of king. And so he asked me politely and deferentially if I would find some other passages. And he had some other passages to suggest and we used those in the inaugural ceremony.

Well that's very significant because you could read this passage to be calling on believers to give an absolute unqualified submission to government authority, no matter how evil it is. Is this passage really saying that Christians, under no circumstances, may ever oppose a Hitler, a Stalin, a Chairman Mao, a Pol Pot, or fill in any of the tyrannical despots who've existed over the course of human history? Is that what Paul is saying? No. No, it's not. But what he is saying is very, very helpful to us precisely where we are right now in this cultural moment.

Because I believe that one of the things that we learned in the most recent election, and it's something that we've been seeing coming for some time, but we learned, I think, perhaps in a way that we haven't before, that things are not the way they used to be. I was recently talking to a senior member of this congregation and he asked me a very poignant question. He said, "Do you think things will ever be again like they used to be?" He was speaking of these kinds of cultural and moral and spiritual issues that came to the fore in the last election. And I had to shake my head sadly and say, "No, I don't believe things will ever be again like they used to be." But Christian, do not be discouraged because God is sovereign and He has appointed us, Esther-like, for such a time as this.

What do we do then? Paul has wisdom for us. He has wisdom for us in how we respond to this cultural moment. He has wisdom for us in how we pray in this cultural moment. And He has wisdom for us in how we engage in this cultural moment. Respond, engage, pray. Let me walk those things through with you for just a few moments.

WISDOM FOR THIS CULTURAL MOMENT

First, Paul has wisdom for us in how we respond in this cultural moment. His words are liberating for the Christian, not enslaving. In other words, when he calls on us to acknowledge the authority of the government and to respect the authority of the government, Paul's purpose is not to relegate Christians to an absolute submission to unjust despots, but to alleviate consciences of the inevitable conundrums that Christians face in all societies. Think of it, my friends. These Christians in Rome were living under Nero! Paul is writing this letter while Nero is the Caesar. Nero's justice system will eventually put Paul to death. Now can you imagine the kind of ethical conundrums that Christians would have had under that situation? You're a Christian, you live in Asia Minor or you live in Rome, and you begin to ask yourself, "Should I pay taxes? I mean, after all, my tax money is going to a government that is actively persecuting Christians. Surely it would be wrong for me to pay taxes because if I pay taxes because if I pay taxes I'm paying taxes that will at least in part go to the persecution of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ." And then you don't pay taxes and then you find yourself the object of even more aggressive persecution by the Roman authorities. And what Paul is saying in this passage is, "Christian, don't tie yourself up in knots about that kind of question because there is no end to that question. You understand that in all human societies, all governments, even the best of them, do things that are immoral and if Christians must not pay taxes because of any immorality done by a government, guess what? We can't pay taxes anywhere."

Now that may be happy news for some of you, but in fact it puts us in a very difficult situation and that's exactly what Paul is addressing here. He's saying, "No, no, no. Roman Christians, don't paint yourselves in a corner where you have

to either go off the grid or come out swinging against this multi-national empire. No, you have liberty because God is in fact sovereign over this government of this empire in which you live. And you don't have to figure out personally all the ins and outs of where every aspect of your tax money is going to or whether your subjection to that government is in fact furthering aims that it has that are contrary to the Christian cause because God is in control of this." You see, Paul is saying this in order to alleviate Christian's consciences, not to burden them. This is quite important for us to remember.

It's also important for us to remember that this is not the only thing that the Bible says about a believer's relationship to an unjust state. Let me point you to four other examples. In the book of Exodus, in the very opening verses, we encounter a command of Pharaoh to the Hebrew midwives that they are to put to death the children, of the male children, who are born to the Hebrews. Do those Hebrew midwives follow Romans 13, if I can speak anachronistically, in such a way that they say, "Well, Pharaoh told me that I need to put to death the male children of the Hebrews so I guess in order to show my respect for the government, I guess I'm just going to do that." No. The Hebrew midwives defy Pharaoh's authority and they're commended for it by God. They're commended by Moses for defying Pharaoh's authority. In fact, one of the beautiful things that happening in the opening chapter of Exodus is this. Pharaoh, in Egypt, is worshiped as a god, and he declares that his will is for the male Hebrew children to die, and these Hebrew midwives, not high up on the social hierarchy of Egypt, but slave women in the land of Goshen, thwart the will of the one who is supposedly the god of Egypt. It's a way that God is mocking Pharaoh. He's saying, "Oh, Pharaoh, you're a god? Oh let's see. I'll choose some slave women to thwart your will to show that I am sovereign." And so they are not required to give in to what the government tells them to do.

Another example is of course the situation with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego under Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar calls upon everyone to bow to a golden image of him. And Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said, "No, we're not going to worship that image, king." Not long after that, you'll remember Darius, the Mede, commanded that no one should pray to anyone but him. And what did Daniel do? He opened up his windows just like he always did and he prayed not to Darius but to the living God. Was he violating Romans 13? No. And think of the Sanhedrin in Acts chapter 4 and 5 when they commanded Peter not to preach in Jesus' name. What did Peter say? "We must obey God rather than men."

Now in all of those cases, we see godly believers defying wicked, despotic authority. So Romans 13 is not the whole story. You have to put all that the Bible says about the believers' response to government together to have a full picture. But what Paul is doing is saying, "Christian, don't paint yourself into a corner." We are likely going to have a very real situation, soon, where we are asking ourselves, "To what extent may we participate in an HHS mandate that requires

us to do things that are against our conscience as informed by Christians?" Already you may know that there are many, many universities and hospitals across our country that have been prepared to oppose in the courts a mandate that would require them to supply abortifacient contraceptives to all of those who are insured under their health plan. That is a situation that is going to come upon us sooner rather than later, and it will raise in the minds of many Christians, "Can I be involved at all in supporting a government that does things like this?" Paul is saying, "Christian, don't paint yourself into a corner too quickly."

And notice by the way that the situations in the Bible in which believers defy unbiblical authority in the government are very direct circumstances. The Hebrew midwives, it's the issue of murder, just like Ralph was talking about tonight. You're told you must murder, the answer as a believer is, "No, I will not." Or the issue of worship. "You will bow down and worship this golden statue." "No, I will not." Or the issue of prayer. "You will not pray to the one, true God. You'll pray to me." "No, I will not." Or preaching. "You will not preach in the name of Jesus." "Yes, I will preach in the name of Jesus." They are all situations in which direct commands are given to believers to violate the fundamental teachings of Scripture. And in those situations we have to say, "I must obey God rather than men." But Paul is saying don't be too quick to paint yourself in a corner to have to oppose every injustice that is performed by a government everywhere or we would never ever be able to be citizens of any country in this world.

INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO PRAY FOR OUR GOVERNMENT

The second thing that I want to say is that Paul's words teach us something about how we are to pray. And I want to point you to a couple of things. First, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." And then look down to verse 7. "Pay to all what is owed them" — and this is especially what I want you to see; not the words about taxes and revenue but this — "respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." Now what do we learn about how we pray in that passage? Two things.

First of all, as Christians, we know that we are to pray for those in governmental authority. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy that we are to pray for kings and all who are in authority. We know we're to do that because God has instituted government. But do you know that we not only pray for those who are in authority because God had told us to pray for those in authority and God has told us that He has instituted all authority, we pray out of neighbor love. We pray out of neighbor love. And especially in a democracy in which we may vigorously disagree, even over very clear moral issues, with people who are in fact unbelievers that are fellow citizens and hold positions of authority, we are called to pray in neighbor love for them, respecting their person. So Christian, when you pray for those who in public life you vigorously disagree with, let me urge you to remember the

second great commandment that Ralph mentioned tonight, “Love your neighbor,” and determine to pray for the wellbeing of those even with whom you disagree. That does not mean that you set aside your principles. No, we remember that God is the one who determines what is right and wrong and we serve God, not man. And the Lord has promised to establish the distinction between righteousness and wickedness, and we serve God and not man. And so we will oppose all who undermine Biblical, moral standards in our society and who fail to uphold justice for the unborn and who undermine religious liberty or condone an ethos that is hostile to the Gospel. And we’ll pray for God’s purposes to triumph over their plans, but we will, insofar as we are able, do so with a respect for their persons and with a neighbor love for them. We want to show a genuine Gospel neighbor love even for those with whom we disagree most vigorously.

ENGAGING WITH CULTURE

Third, how do we engage in this culture and what does Paul teach us here in Romans 13? Well, I want to offer six particular ways in which we may engage.

DO NOT WITHDRAW

The first thing I want to urge you to do is do not withdraw. Do not withdraw. There have been many folks that I’ve talked to over the last few weeks who have been deeply discouraged about the state of our nation and it’s been their temptation to withdraw in despair. Do not withdraw. Alternatively, get to know your neighbors and show them your Christian love. It’s more important than ever before that Christians not withdraw in our society but that we reach out and show Christian neighbor love.

STAND FOR CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES AND CONVICTIONS

Secondly, be prepared to stand on your Christian principles and convictions, even if it costs you. This will increasingly be the case for us in our culture.

EXPLAIN YOUR ETHICAL CONVICTIONS TO YOUR CHILDREN

Third, explain to your children the Biblical basis of your ethical convictions and do not assume that they will agree with you. Explain to your children, and might I add, explain to your grandchildren, the Biblical basis of your ethical convictions and do not assume that they will agree. I can remember my younger brother, John, asking my father some questions about why he believed certain things ought to be the way that he thought they ought to be in terms of family and society and politics. And my father got mad just because my brother was asking the question. He didn’t like that my brother was even considering the alternative! Well, we live in a day and age where you probably need to assume that your children and grandchildren have imbibed a difference sentiment from the culture

than the convictions which you hold. And the only way in which you will be able to inculcate the next generation in those strong Biblical convictions is if you carefully, clearly, Biblically, and persuasively present why you hold the moral principles that you hold. Rejoice in those opportunities. Don't be offended when a young person says to you, "But why do we think traditional marriage is the only way? Isn't that being narrow? Isn't that discriminating against people? Isn't that being arbitrary that we're telling some people that they can love who they want to love but we're telling other people that they can't love who they want to love?" If we do not articulate clearly, Biblically, and persuasively our convictions on these key moral principles to the next generation, they will adopt the outlook of the world.

DO NOT STOP PRAYING FOR YOUR COUNTRY

Fourth, don't stop praying for your country and don't disengage from the political process or the culture. It is my hunch that we, as Bible believing Christians, are going to be in a minority in the political process here in the United States for the foreseeable future, whereas, up until our own time, Bible believing Christians have constituted, if not an outright majority, a dominant plurality in our culture. And in that context it would be very easy to be discouraged, to stop praying for our culture, and to stop engaging in the political process. Don't do that. Why? Well for a lot of reasons, but one is simply this. Remember that the Christians to whom Paul was writing in Romans 13 were a tiny minority, a tiny minority in the most powerful, polytheistic empire in the world, in the West, in its time. And within two hundred years they had turned it upside down. Don't be discouraged; don't stop praying; don't cease to engage in the political process or the culture.

ENGAGE IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Fifth, be prepared to engage in the cultural and political process disagreeing with dominant voices which are denigrating Biblical truth but do so while you do it with powerful argument and with passion and with intelligence and with persuasion, but do it with absolutely no hatred, disrespect, or condescension. We have to be in the mode of not assuming that our culture is with us anymore, and you won't win the culture by hating it. You'll win the culture by persuading it. If you hate, the choir will love you — not our choir, I'm talking about the people you agree with — will love it when you hate on that culture. But you won't persuade anybody. Don't respond with condescension and disrespect, but persuade. You know, our media doesn't encourage us to do this. On left and right there is a pervasive tone of disrespect that is cultivated in the way we think about and speak about our governmental leaders. Christians ought to speak more respectfully about our government, our nation, and our government leaders than anyone else, even if we passionately disagree with the morality and the policies of those same leaders. And we want to show people that we have reasons, we want to persuade people, we want people to understand that we've thought through these issues. We're not just name calling, we're not denigrating; we're engaging

in rigorous, intelligent disagreement, which is the bedrock of a democratic republic. But the language of denigration and condescension and hatred, it should be far from us. We should remember that our God is King. We know how this story ends. When it ends, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And therefore, we can engage with some confidence in the political process because it doesn't matter who long it takes, it will get there.

VIEW YOURSELF AS A CITIZEN OF GOD'S KINGDOM

Sixth and finally, determine to view yourself more than ever as citizens of another kingdom. You know, I grew up in a culture where it would have been very easy to mistake this nation as a Christian nation, as a city on the hill. But we look for a city which has foundations whose architect and builder is God. This world is not our home. We're not home yet. And we can engage with profound love for our country, while knowing that we were ultimately made for another country and we are ultimately citizens of another country, a heavenly one. And so our hopes and dreams, though they may be deeply impacted by what goes on here, and they should be, we should weep tears and we should sing songs of joy when God is glorified or when His Word is denigrated. We should care about the things that we see in our culture, but we should remember that we are citizens of another country, heavenly citizens, and in that country, God is always honored and Christ is always loved and proclaimed.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for this opportunity to think all too briefly about how to respond to what is happening in our own day and time. Speak to our hearts over and over Your promises. "Be of good courage; be not dismayed; I am with you. In My hand is the heart of the king. There is no authority that I have not set up. The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever." Speak these words into our ears and our hearts and give us courage, courage to be Your witnesses, courage to respond to the discouraging things in our day and time, courage to pray as we ought, courage to engage as we should. And we'll give You all the praise and glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Would you please stand and receive God's blessing?

Peace be to the brethren and love with faith, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, until the daybreak and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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