

**(7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)**

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## Romans 13

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

This past Wednesday, we celebrated Independence Day. As you know, it is the day the Declaration of Independence was approved, stating in no uncertain terms, the intent of the representatives of the Continental Congress to throw off the yoke of bondage they felt under the rule of King George III of England.

So it is with a bit of irony, that a meme, which is a humorous image or video that circulates on social media, showed up on my Facebook page this past Wednesday. It was a famous picture of Founding Father's assembled together, with the caption: "**Gentlemen, the revolution is off. I just read Romans 13.**"

We too just read Romans 13, but not because of the meme, rather, because recently it made headline news recently. If you remember, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, quoted Romans 13 in defending the President's "**Zero Tolerance**" policy that has led to the separation of children from their parents.

In using this biblical passage to justify their actions, Mr. Sessions said in a speech to law enforcement officers in Fort Wayne, Indiana: "**I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes.**" (Washington Post)

Of course, Jeff Sessions is not the first political leader to use a passage from the bible to defend their policies. Romans 13 was also used to support Hitler and his Nazi reign of terror.

As you may know, you can lift a passage of scripture out of its context to make it support your cause or position. Just ask my seminarian classmates.

When our favorite watering hole was closed, we passed a non-binding seminary resolution, quoting God's instructions that the Prophet Jeremiah was to tell the people. Given our State's reputation for binge drinking, some Wisconsinites might find this fitting as well: **"This is what the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel says: Drink, get drunk, vomit, fall down and rise no more... And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them: Thus says the Lord of hosts: You must drink!" (25:27-28)**

There are those who quote passages like Colossians 3:18, about women being submissive to their husbands and not speaking in church to defend domestic abuse and gender inequality in church, the workplace, and sports field too.

So let's come back to Romans 13. How are we to read and understand this challenging passage in Paul's letter to the early community of followers of Jesus in Rome? As one scholar, said: **"The Bible is a weapon in the hands of coercive power."**

And she is correct. Over the centuries Paul's words in Romans 13 have been used, and some might say, abused, to justify anything from slavery to the oppression of minorities, women, children, and the poor by political leaders around the world and here in the United States. And now, it is being used to justify the actions of a government to separate children from their parents because they have come seeking safe sanctuary from the violence back in their home countries.

If you read it out of context, as a stand alone passage, a person certainly could use it as a powerful weapon to keep the masses in line with a cruel and corrupt government. In that way, the Founding Fathers were in open violation of Romans 13.

So was Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Civil Rights leaders who openly challenged the United States laws around segregation and discrimination. The same can then be said for those who resisted Hitler and the Nazi regime or any ruthless Dictator or Fascist leader.

And what do we do with the likes of Gandhi or Oscar Romero or St. Francis of Assisi or anyone who has ever stood up to a corrupt government or political leader?

If we simply read Romans 13:1-7 as stand alone verses, lifted out of the larger context of Paul's letter, well, who could ever question an unjust law or government action or Presidential decree? We would all have to accept it, live with it, even if it killed people.

But we must not read any passage in isolation or lift it out of its larger context within the whole of our sacred faith story. And that is the challenge for us as followers of Jesus today.

Paul, a Roman citizen, has his own clashes with the civil authorities and the Roman Empire. He himself has been thrown in jail for engaging in non-violent acts of civil disobedience. Like Dr. King, Gandhi, and others who also engaged in non-violent civil disobedience, Paul is eventually executed in Rome by the political powers in charge.

In order for people to understand Romans 13:1-7, you must read the whole of the letter Paul is writing and what is going on in that early church.

Rome is the center of the political Empire. This may surprise you, but the early Christian Community was fractured, conflict had erupted between the, if you will, Progressives and Conservatives, or non-Jewish followers of Jesus and the Jewish ones.

Jesus was the corner stone of our faith. In Christ, we are justified by our faith and not works. In Christ humanity is made one body. Through Jesus, God has brought about a new humanity, a new way of living and relating to one another based solely on one law - Love.

We talked about this as we explored the 10 Commandments, which Paul references in Romans 13 as well.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Love, Paul says, is the fulfillment of God’s law.

The love we are commanded by Jesus to faithfully live out in our relationship with God and neighbor, Paul says, “does no wrong to our neighbor.”

Which brings back to the question a legal expert once asked of Jesus, and you can almost hear it as a question raised by a talking head on your favorite news show: “Who is our neighbor that I must love?”

Who is our neighbor? We know the parable. We know Jesus’ question back to the legal expert: “Who was the neighbor?” We know his answer: The person who shows compassion and mercy, love and kindness, empathy and understanding to the “other”.

And we know Jesus command: “Go and do likewise.”

We know all that, yes, but do we believe Jesus when it comes to seeing the “other” who isn’t a Samaritan, but rather an immigrant, a refugee, a person of color, a Muslim, a Jew, or even a person of opposing political views as our neighbors?

In order to truly understand Paul’s words in Romans 13, we must understand the context of his whole letter, and to understand his letter, we must, as followers of Jesus, understand that in Christ, God’s love was fully revealed in his life, his teachings, his relationships, his suffering, his death and his rising again to new life.

Paul’s hope, and it is the whole of the law - is based on love for God and neighbor. Not just the neighbors we like and who look and act like us. Not just the neighbors we live next door to or down the street from, but our neighbors who are different than us, our neighbors who border our community, our nation, our global community.

Paul’s belief and his hope, is that all governments, political leaders and especially people like you and me who profess to follow Jesus, will base their laws and government policies and relationships on one simple law - God’s love for all people.

Politics, as I have said, is simply about how we are called to live in relationship with one another.

In that way, Jesus was very political, as is God. And the rule of law is so very simple and yet, so very challenging to us - because it is based on two simple commands - Love God and love all people as we love ourselves.

So what are we called to do as followers of Jesus when we, God’s people, and all people throughout the whole world, are all God’s people, regardless of one’s nationality, creed, or ethnic identity, fail to love?

Shall we remain silent when faced with injustices, abuse, oppression, and hatred enacted by governments, political leaders, and people like us? Or shall we speak up,

challenging the political powers that be - at home, in community, in our nation and world, engaging in acts of non-violent civil disobedience by showing the way of God's love to others that brings healing and hope, reconciliation and justice, and new life to a broken world filled with pain and suffering, hate and fear, oppression, violence and death? What do you think?