

The Gift of Government
Romans 13:1-7
October 15, 2023

Main Point:

This passage is another practical application of this letter to the Christians at Rome. Paul's unfolding of the mercies of God given to us in the gospel lead to practical life application. Paul has just called us to 'not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (12:21) and now we see one way God overcomes evil with good – by giving us government.

Government is a gift, it has limits, and requires duties from us.

Intro:

The practical outworkings of renewing our minds, being transformed by the Spirit's renewing grace to give us a confident trust in God's providential care of His world through the governing authorities that He puts in place.

The overflow of loving your enemies. (12:19-20)

The overflow of 'do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' (12:21)

The overflow of renewing your mind. (12:1-2)

The gospel and only the gospel gives us these resources. The gospel starts with the bad news that people are broken and need something outside themselves to heal them. And the gospel then is the good news of God so loving the world that He sent His only Son to live perfectly in our place and take the wrath of God in our place so that we can be saved from ourselves and this wicked, broken world.

And one of the ways that God loves the world is through earthly governing authorities.

Therefore, be subject to, do not resist, obey their earthly authority, pay taxes, respect, and honor.

Paul being realistic – as the Bible is – about the sin in the world, and the sinful tendencies of Christians. We long for a utopia where Christians can govern themselves – but that's proven impossible as a walk down history tells us.

The requirement of honesty, humility, ongoing repentance and faith, weakness, frailty, the need for strong laws that are enforced.

Therefore we need to see government as a gift. (trans to 1)

1. The Gift of Government (whole passage)

Christianity is a friend of the state

Christians are not to be feared by the state, but thanked. Christians have such wholehearted belief and trust in God's sovereign rule and reign, that we respect, honor, and pray for the flourishing of the governing authorities. Why? Because God has put them in place.

All these words of God's sovereign placement and usage of governing authorities:
Authority from God (v. 1)
Instituted by God (v.1)
Appointed by God (v. 2)
God's servant (v. 4)
Avenger carrying out God's wrath (v. 4) – see 12:19 (war, vengeance, capital punish)
Ministers of God (v. 6)

Titus 3:1 Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work...

1 Peter 2:13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme...

We believe in God's common grace to His world – v. 1 – every person, every soul –
Mandate to all people to honor the governing authorities

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is a deeply comforting doctrine – and think of the alternative! That God is not in control, not ordering all things, all decisions...

Muse quote – 'Come ride with me
Through the veins of history,
I'll show you a God who
Falls asleep on the job' (Knights of Cydonia)

No, Christians say that God is in control and that Christians are responsible, the Church is responsible to hold government accountable to its God-given role as servant for the good of maintaining order in society.

Partner with Govt as much as we can – We are your friend b/c you are God's servant to maintain order in society and to punish evil. Partner with, but remain separate from – lots of examples of church and state being united that leads to one seeking to control the other. The govt needs the church to be the church. The church needs the govt to be the govt. Separate spheres, separate institutions. Ideally, serving one another.

ILLUS of police dept dropping off Bill McNally at our front door.

The resources that Christianity brings to government to serve them:

Subjection to, obedience to, respect for, honor

Human life and human flourishing is always primary b/c we believe in the dignity of every human being created in the image of God. Is this going to further life or inhibit life? Is this going to harm people or give them opportunity to grow based on their own God-given freedom of conscience. Lots of debate.

Common grace – 'every person' – we are govt's friends, we support them being in power until they cross a moral line (trans to 2)

2. The Limits of Government (esp v. 1)

2 ways – it's on a leash, and it can't give you what God can give you

It's on a leash

I have a hierarchy of relationships and God comes first and stays first.

Not absolute authority

v. 1 – be subject to, not obey (we are govt's best friends and wounds from a friend can be trusted – call govt out! –)

No easy answers here – Paul and Peter writing during time when Roman governors saw themselves as serving the gods and the Caesar as a god - submit to evil governments?

“It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Rom 13:1-7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning.” - Moo, 806.

Submission to govt can be compatible with disobedience in certain exceptional circumstances – biblical examples

Exodus – The midwives lied to the governing authorities b/c of a higher law – God's law. Do not murder.

Moses – defied the Pharaoh – He was not God and the Egyptian gods were not God -

Daniel 3 – fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego – refused to obey the authority b/c of a higher law - Do not worship any other gods.

Dan 4 – Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation – “so that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will...”

Philemon – Paul's letter to Philemon – Roman society thrived on slavery but Paul undermines it through the radical law of love.

And in the NT era - Christians eventually overcame Roman laws allowing infanticide, gladiatorial contests, and in America, Christians eventually overcame race based laws of segregation.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s was led by Christians who took this so seriously that they took direct action of non-violent protests against the governing authorities who through law had entrenched racial segregation into society.

An unjust law deserves to be disobeyed b/c it is not a law at all. (Augustine) ...

*Covid shots – requirement for federal employees (mandated, but religious exemptions were allowed)

v. 5 – conscience requires us to be in subjection to the governing authorities – but if they cross a moral line and enact an unjust law (Augustine)

How to disobey an unjust law: MLK's Letter from a Birmingham Jail: “One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and

willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.”

So to quote one of the women who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56) to protest the law of racial segregation, with one of the most theologically astute summary statements of Christian civil disobedience: “my feet is tired, but my soul is at rest.”

So, in our day, this would be Jimmy Lai (and many others) in a Hong Kong prison for supporting pro-democracy rallies and could have left but says, “If you believe in the Lord, if you believe that all suffering has a reason, and the Lord is suffering with me...I'm at peace with it.”

Or some who b/c of freedom of conscience faced consequences from their employers for not taking a Covid vaccine shot.

The point of this passage is not to find ways to rebel against government, but to find ways to honor it, to respect it, to call it out, to serve the government by calling it to its higher purpose – you are God’s servant for our good! (v. 4) We Christians are your friends to call you to this higher law – the highest law of loving God and loving humanity for the sake of its flourishing.

It's on a leash, and
Govt can't give you what God can give you. Only God can save.

The motto of Urban Hope “out of Egypt and into the Promised Land of freedom” – out of dependency upon the govt and into the promised land of freedom in Christ and who He has made you to be – created in His image, given agency to make choices, given abilities and talents and dignity to work and meet your needs and those of others.

Christians have always longed for and sought for heaven on earth – Christian rulers, Christians governors. The Pilgrims came to these shores for that very reason. Christian principles to govern our earthly lives.

I think one reason is to avoid persecution. Those who have been persecuted for their religious beliefs deeply appreciate the freedom of religion that Western countries practice based on freedom of conscience that Christianity provides.

The Church is a check on government’s desire to have power over its citizens instead of serving its citizens.

Public servants – restore this language – we used to call governing officials public servants.

Once you are saved, once you have been given eyes to see God’s providential care then you can with love and wholeheartedness give your duty – trans to 3:

3. The Requirements of Government (Christian duty to governing authorities)
(vs. 5-7) / Obligations (the duties we are called to bc we are governed)

Acknowledge that you need govt! Jesus did.

*See illus of Jesus – Matt 22:15-22 – give to Caesar what is Caesar’s – great protection for our conscience – Jesus was not a rebel against earthly government – clear lines – what you can honor about the govt, honor

v. 5 – for the sake of conscience - What does v. 5, “for the sake of conscience” mean?

Moo: refers to the believer’s knowledge of God’s will and purposes- our submission is deeper than avoiding punishment – our submission is from deep belief in God’s providential ordering of human history.

Outworking of 12:1-2

Not just outward conformity, but inward also.

My conscience is captive to a higher law –

This passage is an invitation to consider Christianity for yourself. Many admire Christianity b/c of passages like this. Christianity doesn’t want power or domination. It wants to serve from underneath. Christians pursue the lower place, we pursue servanthood, and we are happy and eager to give government its place.

Don’t just admire, buy in. Sell out. This is invitation to give your heart allegiance to the God who set up the world this way and serve Him and love Him with all your heart, not just admire Him from a safe distance and let the Christians make the world a better place.

And for those of us who are Christians:

This requires so much of us! That God is so sovereign, so much in control, that I can vigorously call the government to do good, and I can rest deeply in God when it doesn’t.

We can protest with all our strength. But only in a way that displays love, non-violence, appeals to the conscience of the oppressors, and does not lead others into evil.

We can love with all our heart the God who put this government, this governing official in power.

We can abide our own conscience, be at peace with ourselves in how we respond, how we live this out, how we vote, how we choose to be involved in government.

See how attractive this is. How compelling. How winnowing. How differentiating between those whose allegiance is ultimately discovered when we are called to present our bodies as a living sacrifice and refuse to be conformed to the pattern of this world but instead we are being transformed by the constant renewing of our minds.

This was the moral power behind the 20th century civil rights movement led by Christians. That the color of skin would not change how people were treated b/c all humans are created in the image of God and equal before him and one another.

This is the moral power behind the pro-life movement, led by Christians to appeal to the consciences of all human beings. Life is life and government should protect and honor and enhance adoption, foster care, medical care because it is fostering life.

This is the moral power of the underground church in Nazi Germany, in communist China, in Putin’s Russia – the power of a renewed mind and transformed heart that only

the gospel gives to His remnant people, especially when the government is pressuring the Church to compromise and cave in to its power and lose its moral voice.

*This is the moral power of so many who resisted the Jan 6 rioters and all who resist so-called Christian nationalism.

And this is the moral power for you to (vs. 6-7) be able to pay your taxes with joy, thanksgiving, and prayerfulness that we Christians would be able to do what we do – bring the message and the reality of life-transformation not through us, but through the crucified Christ who has transformed our lives and enables us to serve the governing authorities.

So look to the cross... conc...

Conc:

Look to the cross – Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery: The cross of Christ would not have existed without the Roman government. It was their tool of execution of criminals, deliberately designed to render maximum humiliation, shame, and physical pain. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities in order to accomplish something much greater than could have possibly been imagined. Jesus' submission to the Roman authorities shows us how to trust God even when experiencing evil from government policies.

Cry out, “how long, Oh Lord?” And then go forward and endure...overcoming evil with good. Not vengeance, not retaliation, not hatred. When the government enacts unjust laws, we pray along with Jesus, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And we speak up with all our heart and voice to call them to serve humanity as God intends them to – as servants of God.

End with: 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Discussion Questions/Prompts for Community Groups

1. What is your very first, honest, knee jerk reaction to the first 9 words of Romans 13:1?
2. Can you think of a time when your conscience before the Lord compelled you to think or do something other than the majority of your friends related to the governing authorities?
3. How can Christians be a better friend to government?
4. How is government a gift to the Church and to society? How has this or does this challenge you?
5. How have you been challenged by a Christian's civil disobedience to an unjust law?
6. There are so many stories – both from the Bible and from history – of Christians obeying the higher law of God's law. What are some from the sermon or from other sources that inspire you?
7. What is one way you can pray for the governing authorities? What is one action that the government has done lately for which you can be thankful?