

*Romans 13, Pt. 1*

Let me paint a picture for you of a faithful Christian life. Imagine a retired man living in a small house with his wife. They have lived in their home for several decades. He worked for many years in one place, having a respectable career if not a particularly lucrative one. He did his job and got along with his co-workers. He keeps a garden now. He visits with other neighbors, some of whom he identifies as “old ladies” even though they are not that different in age from him. He keeps a garden. He takes vegetables to people. He looks out for the young family who lives next door. He faithfully participates in the life of the church. He prays. He likes to watch gospel music and preachers on TV - and professional wrestling sometimes, too. He likes family reunions. He likes big dinners with many seats filled. It probably wouldn't be very surprising to learn that he is also a law-abiding guy. He pays his bills. He votes in elections. He pays his taxes. He follows the traffic laws. The police aren't called to his house. In fact, he is the one who calls the police to let them know how fast people drive in front of his house.

This is a faithful human life. The Christian faith does not supplant and replace normal human life. Instead, it redeems and restores it. Here is a life composed of the basics of Christian confession and practice. This man is faithful to the Bible, faithful to Jesus, faithful to his family, faithful in his work, faithful to his neighbors, and - yes - faithful in his relation to law and governing authority. If I had told you that he spiced up his days with small bouts of shoplifting or liked to place nail strips in front of his house or regularly committed tax evasion, your view of him would probably change.

I think this image of a faithful human life is important as we try to understand what Paul teaches in chapter thirteen. Remember the context. In 12:1-2, Paul calls on the Romans to lay down their bodies as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. Renewing the mind is something that happens as we faithfully study the missionary theology embedded in the first eleven chapters of the text. In the final five chapters, beginning with twelve, Paul shifts our attention to being living sacrifices. The body is the

human self as it interacts with the world. It is the limited, finite self. It is the self as it does one thing at a time in one place at a time with one group of people at a time. The focus here is on behavior, relationships, and community. The twelfth chapter was all about the roles and relationships in the church. The thirteenth chapter broadens things out to the society as a whole. The order is important. We, as followers of Jesus Christ, learn how to be fully functional human beings in the context of God's grace given to God's people. We learn how to love neighbors in the church. We are tempted to get things the wrong way round. Too often, we form relationships in the church according to the standards and practices of the world. Instead, the early Christians knew that right living meant finding identity in Jesus first. It was only as they found their identity in the Christian community that they were then able to go out into the world as ambassadors of Christ.

Chapter thirteen flows out of chapter twelve. If you are the kind of person who lives in the kind of community portrayed in 12:9-21, then you will also be a certain kind of person in the world at large. I think the heart of the thirteenth chapter is found in v. 10: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Romans 13 - though not as popular as 1 Corinthians 13 on this subject - is all about love. And that love flows out both vertically and horizontally. There is a kind of neighbor love that takes the form of Christ-centered subjection to governing authorities. Then, there is the kind of neighbor love that flows out to the neighbors who are immediately at hand, living in proximity to you in your community.

So, let us speak today of the neighbor love which is put into practice through subjection to governing authorities. Paul is clear that Christians should abide by laws. They should not provoke the wrath of the governing authorities. They should pay taxes - both those that are direct and those which come from commerce (note the difference between "tax" and "revenue" in v. 7). They should give honor and respect to those in positions of authority. Why should Christians do these things? Authority has been established by God (v. 1). The authorities are both God's servants for your good and to administer punishment (literally anger; v. 4). Verse five should be translated: "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of punishment (anger) but also because of conscience." The punishment in view in this verse seems to be the punishment meted out by the authorities as they wield the power of the sword.

So, why should you obey the authorities? Simple: so that you don't get punished and so that you have a clear conscience before God who established the authorities.

This is not a complicated set of verses. Paul is speaking of what should generally be true of Christian people and the Christian community. This is why the picture of the man at the start of the sermon is helpful. If I had revealed to you that he was not a law-abiding person, then you would draw out different kinds of conclusions about his character. He would no longer strike you as a faithful person seeking to live a decent, flourishing human life. His anti-authority and anti-social actions would give a dark edge to his entire life. Instead, his civic responsibility rounds out a compelling portrait of a good man. I sincerely believe that God wants you and I to live decent, humane lives. That means loving neighbors, loving community, and, yes, obeying authorities.

Notice in all of this that I have been speaking of how God generally desires that we live. Paul is not addressing all of the "what ifs" that immediately begin flooding into our minds when we read this passage. He is simply speaking of how it should be. This is all closely tied to his view of creation. God has built some things into the world. There is a design by which God's world runs. For example, from the beginning, God has ordained the institution of the family. The ideal is a permanent male-female marriage, bounded by covenant, in which children are born, raised, and trained to take up life in society. In a broken world, things sometimes go askew with that picture, but God's design doesn't vary. Governing authority works in a similar fashion. The seeds of government are built right into God's commands to Adam and Eve as found in Genesis 1:28 - "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." As they multiplied, a society of many types of relationships would come into existence. The authority structure of the family (parents have authority over children) would shape relations within the broader society. Under God's authority, humanity would exercise authority over creation. When Paul says that authority has been established by God, he is simply dipping into the inspired account of creation. Moreover, Paul says that authorities bear the sword and exercise punishment against offenders. One of the purposes of government is to police the boundaries of the community, to remove from it those behaviors which would destroy it if allowed to take root.

This “bearing of the sword” is also rooted in Genesis. God placed the man in the garden so that he might “cultivate it” and “keep it” (Gen. 2:15). The command to keep the garden implies that Adam was to guard it from intruders. Part of the tragedy of the fall in Genesis 3 is that Adam did not keep the garden safe from the serpent. He should have found the serpent and exercised the sword against it. Instead, the anti-God, anti-humanity beast was allowed to find a home and influence in Eden. After the fall, God placed an angel bearing a sword at the entrance to Eden. This angel was also tasked with keeping (same word in Hebrew) the garden (Gen. 3:24). This “power of the sword,” the power to punish in order to protect the well-being of the community, therefore, is also rooted in God’s design. Paul wants Christians, people who have been redeemed and restored by Jesus Christ, to live decent, good, orderly, and profoundly human lives, and that means loving neighbor by obeying and honoring authorities. Don’t needlessly enrage the civil authorities. Pay your taxes. Do it so that you have a clear conscience before God.

Our portrait of a good life from the beginning is helpful because it shows us a picture of someone who applies the words of Romans 13. In some ways, Paul isn’t interested in the actual governing authorities. He is simply pointing out the kind of lives that Christians should strive to live. But I know that we all want to say more about this passage. The “what ifs” are crowding our minds. So let me quickly share three “of courses” with you. Of course, Paul is not telling us to mindlessly follow the government. Of course, Paul is not telling us that we cannot speak truth to those in authority. Of course, Paul is not telling us that we should disobey God in order to obey men. None of those things can be developed from the passage. God’s people have the mind of Christ. God’s people have a prophetic voice against the misuse of authority. God’s people will always say “Jesus is Lord,” no matter what our governing authorities say. But the point is that we should strive, with the Spirit’s help, to live a certain kind of life. And what of the authorities which misuse the power given to them? Remember the words of 12:19; God says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.” God is righteous and maintains a just standard, and he most certainly will hold the governing authorities to account.

God knows the sins of our own authorities. He keeps track. There has been judgment on our country for sins like slavery and Jim Crow segregation. There

is and will continue to be judgment on our nation for on-demand abortion and the attempted redefinition of God's design for marriage. God weighs our decisions to carry out acts of warfare against other nations. He judges each decision with a standard of perfect righteousness. God keeps track of every political decision rooted in ruthless self-interest. He traces every act of corrupt, backroom dealing. He never fails to notice the ways in which the powerful grind the face of the poor in the dust. That is God's perspective and God's power. You and I must continue to strive to live good and orderly lives. God doesn't want you to be more than your limited, finite self. Love your neighbor. Not your abstract neighbor. Not your ideologically defined neighbor. Love the people around you. Do your job. Take care of your family. Honor authorities. Follow Jesus. Live for his glory. God will sort out the authorities in the end.

I would be remiss to fail to mention one strange twist of this passage that had to occur to Paul as he penned these words. Jesus died because a governing power exercised the sword against him. Jewish and Roman authorities conspired to kill the sinless Son of God. The trial and execution of Jesus was the greatest miscarriage of justice and the greatest misuse of authority ever enacted. But in a manner that could only be devised by God, the death of Jesus contained the means by which God would forever overthrow wicked authorities and forever heal the broken, sin-scarred world. The praise of Revelation 5:12 reads, "Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Christ has ascended to the right hand of God Almighty and from thence he will come to judge the quick and the dead. He will bear the sword fully, finally, and eternally. Is your hope and your faith in Jesus today?