

Romans 13:1-3 "Be Subject To Every Governing Authority"

It has been said that there are two things you don't talk about in polite company: Religion and Politics.

This morning we will see that, for the Christian, it is essential that we consider both and that we understand how God is the One who commands us to consider both according to His word, not according to our pet peeves.

In the context of our study this morning I won't need to use the terms religion and politics. Instead, we will talk of a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ and how that fits into God's plan of how we are to submit to those who govern over us.

I know this is a sticky area to talk about because those who govern over us are often seen as self-serving, ambitious, and in many cases ruthless with their power.

Despite the fact that many people in many different professions would fall into the category of self-serving, ambitious and ruthless with their power, it seems that most people delight in pointing out the failings of politicians, who in some polls, are found less trustworthy than used car salesmen.

Now, I'm not here to tell you that we should look the other way when it comes to those who govern over us because the scriptures don't tell us to look the other way.

However, we must also understand that no matter what kind of government we find ourselves under, God's word makes it clear that we should submit to those who rule over us to the degree that they do not impose on us those laws which force us to disobey God's higher law, which is His word.

I know that there are myriads of examples where every government in existence would violate God's law, but we cannot address every one of them and so I'm forced by the constraints of time to deal specifically with our text and generalize where specifics may come to mind.

Rom 13:1 "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Many people might be surprised to know that every form of government which has ever existed has been allowed to exist by God with the express purpose of being a constraint for mankind. You see, God in His infinite wisdom and love has given men the inherent desire to govern and be governed. The whole idea of government is to bring order to an otherwise disorderly situation.

Can you imagine waking up tomorrow morning to find out that no one is in charge? I know that we're all tempted to take that cheap shot by responding that it seems like no one is in charge, but the fact is that there is an enormous amount of order in this world precisely because God has so ordered it with His divinely appointed means of government.

Don't ever lose sight of the fact that God is orderly. There is no chaos with God. And so, as He gives authority to men to take the chaos and bring order we are seeing God's hand at work in the world. Imagine what kind of chaos there would be without any government.

The NAS puts verse one in this way. "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God."

You and I do not have the option of rejecting the principle of government. Therefore, if we belong to a nation we cannot opt out of participating in the dictates of that government. Why? Because God says so. There's the tendency to think that government is just a necessary evil, when in fact it is because of evil that God has given us government.

Government has always existed. The first form of government would have been self-rule. And for that to be clearly apparent you would go back to Adam and Eve. Prior to great numbers of people the need for organized government was limited and yet there was rule by law.

The Law was from God Himself. 'You shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For in the day that you eat it you shall surely die.' That's the negative side of the law and yet it was also clearly said that if you don't eat you shall live.

Man had the responsibility to rule himself in obedience under the authority of God. Of course man sinned and fell from that perfect relationship with God. But self-rule still existed as men were required to obey God.

As the numbers of people grew so did sin. As a result, all men everywhere, began to form that which is known as government, be it in a tribal setting, a city setting or a nation setting. And because of sin and the promise to man of an escape from its penalty, God's law was made more clear and precise, until He actually gave a written code to one group of people who would be the people through whom the Messiah would come.

Of course we know those people to be the Jewish nation of Israel. Moses was given the law by God which was then given to the people that they may be governed directly by God because of sin.

In fact, Paul talks of this in Gal 3:19 "What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator."

But notice who the ruler is in the case of Israel. It was God Himself. He personally intervened in the affairs of people as He led them. Interestingly enough the name Israel actually means, "Governed by God". In the meantime other people around the world were still blessed by God so that chaos would not be the rule, but instead some form of order.

And in most of those cases it was rule by a King. Of course the King of Israel was God Himself, but there came a time when Israel didn't think God was doing such a hot job and so they asked for an earthly King they could see and touch and go directly to.

Despite the warning from God that this wouldn't be such a great idea He ultimately allowed Israel to have a King, and Saul was the first one. And you can go to the O.T. scriptures to see how Israel's downfall led to this decision, starting with Judges, and how after God gave the Judges it was a King who would ultimately represent the King of Kings in Israel.

In a sense, God is government and He allows men to rule over men as an extension of His character of orderliness. Now, Paul states in Rom.13:1 that there is no authority except from God. And as we look to our own government this is important for Christians to understand.

There's the temptation to think that if I am to submit to government then government must be worthy of my submission by being Godly. And yet when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans the rule

of the day was by Pagan rulers of Rome who promoted such paganism.

And Paul was quite aware of that. But Paul understood that despite the sinfulness of men, even in government, God was still the One who ordains government and gives authority to those in government.

We see this during the time of Christ's arrest just before His crucifixion.

Joh 19:7-11 "The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." 8 When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, 9 and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. 10 "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

The authority and power which Pilate possessed to crucify Christ was given to him by God. And as heinous and unfair as government was in Christ's case, as our Lord stood before this Ruler, God honored Pilate's position, but clearly stated that that position was ordained by God and would be used by God to bring salvation to the world.

By the way, Jesus submitted to capital punishment. There are those inside and outside the church who believe that capital punishment is cruel and inhuman. And yet it was capital punishment which bought for us eternal life as Christ was killed for our sin.

We'll see later that capital punishment was instituted by God Himself for our protection. We may or may not get to that today but our text would show us that even in godless governments God ordains capital punishment.

But let's get back to verse one. Those authorities that exist are established by God. However, that does not mean that each individual in government is personally approved by God.

Yes, God is Sovereign and yes God is in complete control and nothing happens in this world without His awareness and approval for His ultimate glory; but no one could accuse God of being the author of sin nor the promoter of sin.

Was Hitler part of God's ultimate plan? Yes. Was Hitler God's man of the hour to honor God in his position? No. Did God take delight in Hitler's rule over the people of Europe during W.W.II? No.

But, despite how ungodly civil authorities may be God has still ordained government, in which some of these ungodly rulers are a part, to still accomplish His will in bringing order to a world of chaos.

God ordains and stands behind governments and for that reason Paul says in Rom 13:2 "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

In other words, if you rebel against government, you rebel against God. Now, I don't mean to suggest that government has no responsibility to God and to the people over whom they govern. They will be accountable to God for every action. But, despite what we think of any particular government, including our own, God has ordained it for our good. To rebel against it is to rebel against God Himself.

Now the idea of rebelling or resisting authority carries with it the idea of violating the law. And what Paul is basically saying is that if you violate the law of the land you will be judged and convicted according to the law.

What I find interesting about what the Holy Spirit inspires Paul to write in our text is that he does not get into specific areas of justice. Rather, he exhorts us to obey the laws of the land, with only one exception.

That exception comes in the form of resisting or disobeying government as it comes against the law of God and tries to impose its will against God's will on our lives.

Now I don't have time to get into specific areas of how that might work itself in our lives on each individual basis. But I will give you some examples from God's word how those in authority had over-stepped their bounds of rule.

In the book of Daniel we read of King Nebuchadnezzar who made a golden image of himself and ordered all people to worship the idol. Three of his trusted protégés would not submit and the King was very upset. This was a civil law which was not to be violated.

Dan 3:16-18 "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

In this case civil disobedience was encouraged by God, but not without the potential of being on the receiving end of the law as it was carried out. For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego it worked for their good and God's glory. But it doesn't always work out that way and we need to be willing to trust God when we have to take a stand for Him.

In another instance, Queen Esther was a Jew who was the wife of King Ahasuerus, who is also known as Xerxes, who ruled from India to Ethiopia from 486-465 B.C. This is after the Babylonian captivity of the Jews which took place about 100 years before the time of Xerxes.

An edict by Haman, who was Ahasuerus' right hand man, was drawn up to destroy all the Jews. Ahasuerus was tricked into signing it into law. After the plot was disclosed Esther approached the King asking for her life and the life of her people.

He agreed to sign into law the right for the Jews to defend themselves if his former edict was acted upon by any other people under his control. The Jews did in fact defeat those who came against them, because they defended themselves.

But what if they were not given a civil law to allow them to defend themselves? They still would have been well within their rights to defend themselves. All throughout the scriptures God condemns unjust murder from the death of Abel onward.

God's law takes precedence over civil law when the civil authorities would try to destroy a people simply because they were different from others.

What about our command from Jesus to go out into all nations and preach the Gospel and make disciples? What if the authorities said, 'you can't do that'? Well, that was a problem in the early church with the apostles when they were confronted with the Jewish leaders who gave them certain orders.

Act 5:27-29 "Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." 29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

And the implication there is that they must obey God in this particular matter, which violates God's clear mandate, as opposed to obeying men in this matter. It does not mean that we will never obey men. In fact, as we saw earlier, if we do not obey men who have been placed in authority and work within that authority then we disobey God Himself.

We need to keep in mind that simply because someone is placed in authority that does not mean they have all authority. Governing bodies are given by God to rule in the sphere in which they've been placed.

For example, I as parent have the authority to rule my family well. But that does not mean I have the authority given to me by God to rule your family. This church may at times have to enact church discipline, but God has not given this church or any church the authority to discipline by taking someone's life.

And so too with civil government. Civil government is not given authority by God to rule over the affairs of the church. They are not given authority to dictate to Christ's church how they must conduct themselves in that setting. If governments do this, and history has shown that they have on countless occasions, the people are obliged to disobey, sometimes to their own peril.

For example our government has been trying to rule over the affairs of the church for quite some time and it has succeeded in some areas. One area which has been debated, and in some cases enacted, is the area of what types of people may be employed in the church.

Government would try to force churches to hire homosexuals for positions of leadership in their schools or even in positions which include Pastoring a church.

This is none of their business and should be resisted with every fiber of our being because God's word clearly speaks to this issue. On the other, hand if a church forms a S.W.A.T. team to take out government officials they don't like because they say God gave

them this mission, then the civil authorities can certainly come in and deal with the problem.

Don't lose sight of the fact that Paul is speaking to those in the heart of Roman rule. These Christians, some of whom are Jews, many of whom were Gentiles, lived in Rome.

And in the midst of a civil authority, which was evil in many ways, Paul says in Rom 13:3 "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you."

Paul is saying that even under Roman rule you do not have to fear if you submit to the authority and do what is right. But if you do what is wrong; and by that I'm sure Paul would include that which is wrong in God's eyes, not just in the eyes of Rome, then you can expect to suffer the consequences and God will support the government in those instances.

However, if we do what is right, not only do we not have to fear the government, but we'll receive praise from the same. Now, there will always be exceptions to the rule. But the principle remains the same.

Our motivation however, should be to honor and love our God who loved us enough to send His only begotten Son to die for the penalty of our sins.

But He loves us enough to protect us in this world as He institutes authority to watch over us and everyone else in this country. I know there's the tendency to mock government. But God allows us in America to actually take an active role in our government where, throughout history, that was not the case.

We have the privilege to take part in our government. And the law allows us to dissent lawfully and to vote out those who would burden us with laws that are not good for the people. But, we must always look to God who is Sovereign and submit to Him and follow Him.

No matter what government does we still have the obligation to follow Christ in matters of family authority, church authority, and civil government authority.

We'll finish this topic up next week as we consider the role of government to inflict capital punishment as well as some money

matters which have to do with government, in what we endearingly know as taxes.

I'll close with a couple of verses which encourage us to take an active role in government. And it's a role every one of us can take whether we decide to personally aspire to public office or not.

1Ti 2:1-4 "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

The apostle Peter concurs.

1Pe 2:13-17 "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. 16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. 17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."