“The Government Is a Servant of God,” Romans 13:1-7 (Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 28, 2024)

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. **2**Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3**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, **4**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, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. **5**Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. **6**For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. **7**Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

PRAY

The kind of preaching we strive to do at Grace Bible is called “expository preaching.” That’s a technical term for preaching in such a way so that when we open the Bible and start teaching on a passage, our goal is to explain and apply the point the biblical author is making. In other words, we don’t want whoever is teaching on a Sunday morning to just come up with some idea during the week that he wants to talk about, find a verse associated with that theme, and then use the Bible only as a launching pad to talk about what I really want to talk about.

Our goal is to take some portion of the Bible, work hard to unpack it, and ask, “What is God trying to tell us through these verses?” And here’s the thing about expository preaching: you my find yourself teaching a challenging text.

A text can be challenging for a couple of reasons. It can be challenging, first, just because it’s not clear what the Bible is teaching. Certain parts of Revelation, for example, are difficult to understand, and the church has, over the centuries, not been able to agree on precisely what the apostle John meant in those verses.

But a text can be challenging because it’s very clear what the Bible is teaching. It’s clear, ***and we don’t like it.***  I think our text for today falls under that category. Paul in Romans 13 is saying something that we, especially those of us who are American Christians, don’t like to hear. He says we are to submit to the government.

Americans have never liked hearing that. Our country was founded by a lot of people who said, “We can’t submit to this government any longer.” Americans tend to pride ourselves on our independent thinking, our self-sufficiency, on the rights we have that keep the government from being able to do certain things. And I say that as someone who is proud and thankful to be an American citizen. I love my country. I love the principles on which our country was established. I wouldn’t want to live in any other country on earth.

But Paul says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” and Americans, including this one, don’t naturally want to be told that. We must see three things about the submission we are to give to the government: *first, it is respectful.* *Second, it is a witness.* *Third, it is trusting.*

First, submission is respectful. Let’s read verses 1-2: “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. **2**Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

We’ll have to do a little background work in order for these verses to hit us the way they should. Who was the supreme governing authority when Paul wrote Romans? In other words, who was in charge in Rome when Paul wrote to the church in that city? It was Emperor Nero. He reigned fourteen years over the empire; almost all the New Testament was written during his time on the throne.

We know some things about Nero. He was not a good man. We know that Nero murdered his mother and beat his wife to death. He kicked her until she died (and she was also pregnant when he kicked her). We know he had garden parties at night, and he would light his garden by covering Christians in pitch, crucifying them, and then setting them on fire. Nero was a wicked man. And these accounts that have come down to us about how evil Nero was were written by other Romans, not by the Christians he killed. Even the Romans thought Nero was evil.

Yet Paul says Christians are to submit to this man and the government he represents. I think the question on everyone’s mind is: what is Paul thinking? Some have argued that Nero committed his worst atrocities after Paul wrote Romans. Therefore, Paul would have written something different if he had waited 3 or 4 years to write Romans.

That theory has never held water for me not only because it’s completely speculative but also because God’s people have always been taught to submit to their government, and many of those governments were evil.

In the second half of his reign, King Saul (the first king of Israel) thought God’s priests at the tabernacle were conspiring against him in favor of the future king David. Therefore, he ordered that eighty-five of them (the priests) be killed, and the town they lived in (along with all the people who lived there) destroyed. These were God’s priests, the ones who served before the ark of the covenant, yet Saul had them killed.

David knew all this, and he had two different opportunities to kill King Saul himself and put an end to his tyranny. Once was when Saul stepped into a cave to relieve himself, not knowing that David and his men were hiding in the back of the cave. We talked about that incident, found in 1 Samuel 24, last week.

The second opportunity is found in 1 Samuel 26. God has caused Saul and the men with him to fall into a deep sleep, and King David and Abishai, one of his soldiers, snuck into their camp. Abishai says to David, “God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice.” 1 Samuel 26:8. In other words, he’s saying, “David, it’s time for Saul to die. We need to get rid of him!” But David replies, “Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless? … As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish. **11**The Lord forbid that I should put out my hand against the Lord’s anointed.” 1 Samuel 26:9-11a.

David says, “It doesn’t matter that Saul is wicked. The Lord put him in that office. He is the king.” And likewise, Paul says, “It doesn’t matter that Nero is wicked. The Lord put him in that office. He is the emperor, and even though he has done evil he is to be honored and respected.” That’s verse 7: “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, ***respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed***.”

Fast forward to today: what do you think Paul would tell us about the honor and respect due our President? Or our governor? Or our mayor, or sheriff, or legislator, or you name it?

Not to put too fine a point on it, let’s talk about some of our leaders. The last five presidents of the United States are Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George Bush, and Bill Clinton. I doubt if anyone voted for all five of them. Some of us may not have voted for any of them.

Think with me for a moment with me about some of the things these men did in their private lives, some of the things they were accused of, some of the things they were almost certainly guilty of. Think of some of the scandals associated with these men, their families, and their administrations. You have those things in mind?

Yet I have no doubt that we need to read Romans 13 and hear Paul saying, “If I can tell the Roman Christians in the first century to honor and respect Nero, you Christians in the 21st century in the United States can honor and respect your presidents.”

Now let’s read 1 Timothy 2:1-4: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, **2**for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. **3**This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, **4**who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

We’ve had a practice for over a decade at Grace Bible Church of praying for government officials on Sunday mornings, and I’ve been told it’s the thing people new to our church comment on the most about our services. Some people, I’ve heard, find it refreshing. They think it’s good that we pray for our leaders by name.

But I also know that praying like this has made us suspect to some of the people in our church. I know that when I pray for Joe Biden, some people have thought, “Doesn’t he know how corrupt Biden is? Doesn’t he know the kind of judges the Biden administration wants on the bench? Does J.D. support socialism? Why is he praying for him?” But when Donald Trump was president, there were people who thought, “How could J.D. pray for him? After all the things Trump’s been accused of when it comes to women, when it seems he supports racists, why in the world are we taking time on Sunday mornings to pray for that terrible man?”

I’ll tell you why we do it: ***because we are commanded to.*** And if you wonder, “But, J.D, if I show respect to this leader but they have this policy or belief that I think is wrong, they’re trying to pass this law that is clearly contrary to the Bible, am I somehow condoning it? Am I somehow supporting evil?” I’ll be honest: I’ve worried about that. If I think this President, this governor, is bad at their job and advocating for policies that will hurt people I care about or help destroy our society, am I somehow enabling them by praying for them?

I’ll answer that question with a question (and I must credit a pastor named Brian Habig for this insight, whose teaching on this subject helped me greatly as I wrote this sermon): do you think that Paul was enabling the crucifixion of Christians by praying for Nero? Do you think David was condoning the murder of priests by calling Saul “God’s anointed”? Of course not.

So, practically, how can we obey Paul’s commands in Romans 13? If you’re involved in politics, it doesn’t mean you have to vote for people in office. It doesn’t mean you can’t criticize their policies. It doesn’t mean you can’t run against them. That’s the wonderful thing about the republic in which we live: it is built into the system that candidates must ***run*** for office. They must campaign and win votes. I think being involved in politics is a wonderful way to respect not only those in office (for they shouldn’t be scared of honest debate) but also the values on which our country has been built. ***Our country is better off when incumbents don’t run unopposed.***

But for those of us who aren’t in politics, what might it look like to honor the governing authorities? Let’s say it’s Thanksgiving, you’re back home with your family, and you’re all gathered around the table for a meal, and your brother-in-law launches into a diatribe about Joe Biden or Tate Reeves or Robyn Tannehill and how terrible they are and how they are ruining our country, our state, our city. What if you interrupted him at some point and said, “You may be right. So, let’s take a few minutes and pray for this official, that God would open his eyes to the truth and give him wisdom to lead. And let’s pray for ourselves, that we would honor and respect even those officials with whom we disagree. Sound good? OK, let’s pray.”

Now, would that be awkward? Probably, but not any less awkward than continuing to listen to your brother-in-law. I bet everyone would want to change the subject after you prayed. Besides, who’s going to argue with you? Who’s going to say, “No, I don’t want to pray.” But, most importantly, you would have been obedient, doing something practical to show honor to those in office. Submission is respectful and that gets us to the second point.

Second, submission is a witness. Everyone it seems talks about how polarized our politics are today. In other words, there’s no middle ground. Everyone thinks that their side is right, and the other side is not just wrong ***but evil.*** Some say our country has never been more polarized. I’m not sure that’s true. The country was polarized during the American Revolution. It was polarized in the years leading up to the Civil War. It was polarized during the era of the Vietnam conflict and the Civil Rights movement.

So, I don’t know that it’s the worst it’s ever been, but things aren’t great. Worse, I think, than they were in the 1990’s, for example.

But if Christians will give this kind of respectful submission to our governing authorities, it will be a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When everyone else is fighting over politics, Christians can a take a stand and say, “I am going to pray for my leaders. I am going to honor them and the offices they hold. I don’t agree with them on everything, but I am not going to say things like, ‘He’s not my president,’ ***because I believe the Bible when the Bible says that even bad governments do good things.”***

That’s Romans 13:3-4: “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, **4**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, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

I don’t care how terrible you think the people in government are. You would rather have those people in office than no one in office.

You do not want to live in a state of anarchy. Have you heard the news out of Haiti lately? They have no government, and so gangs have filled the void. You can’t go to the grocery store in much of Haiti because a gang will rob you on your way and, even if you could get to the store, there’s no food in it.

A bad government still does good things. They restrain evil. They create an environment where a farmer can grow his crops, sell it to someone who can package it and get it to a grocery store, so that you can go there and buy it. ***Where there is no government, people starve.***

When Christians say, “I’m going to honor those in authority over me, even though I strongly disagree with some of their policies, because ultimately I know they are a blessing from God,” people both inside and outside the church notice. They can’t help it. They are so used to hearing nothing but hate directed by people on one side of the political spectrum to the other that it stands out.

The respect we show our officials is a witness, as is our obedience to the various laws of the land. Romans 13 does mean that Christians must obey the traffic laws (just in case you were wondering). Christians shouldn’t speed. But sometimes we do. And when we get pulled over, instead of being rude to the officer and saying, “Don’t you have something better to do? Do you even care about all the crimes being committed or do you just like throwing your weight around?” what if we said, “Yes, officer. I was speeding. I shouldn’t have done it. Here’s my license. Thanks for keeping us safe,” that’s a witness.

That is a Christian humbly submitting to the proper governmental authority and it’s a witness not only to the officer but also to whoever might be in your car, especially if it’s your children. They’ll remember that kind of interaction and be more likely to repeat it in the future, and I don’t see how anyone could seriously argue that’s a bad thing.

But, let’s be honest, it’s hard to submit. Most police officers are professionals and take seriously their responsibility to serve and protect, but there are bad apples who act like jerks. It’s hard to submit to those guys. And it’s hard to be a witness by showing respect to those in office work to pass laws that we think are not just bad ideas but destructive to our society.

How can we do it? Third, submission is trusting. Let’s read verses 1b-2: “For there is no authority except from God, and ***those that exist have been instituted by God***. **2**Therefore ***whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed***, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

Christians don’t honor and respect our leaders because we are naturally good people or because we always agree with those in office. We honor and respect them because we recognize that ultimately God put them there.

Whether it’s Joe Biden, Donald Trump, King Saul, or Emperor Nero, they are there because God put them there, and that is reason enough for Christians to submit.

And we don’t pray for our leaders or show respect and honor because we trust ***them.*** Not at all. I pray for our leaders because ***I don’t trust them***, ***though I trust the God who put them there.*** And ***Paul is telling us in Romans 13 that one of the best measures of how much you trust God is how much honor and respect you show those in government.***

Yet, as in all things, God is not booming down some directive from heaven at his people and saying, “Just trust me and do this.” No, God leads by example. God came down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ ***and submitted to the government first.***

One of the titles Jesus Christ used most often for himself is “Son of Man.” That’s not a reference to his humanity, that’s not Jesus saying, “I’m just like you, because I was born of a woman.” That’s a reference to Daniel 7, where we read about someone with all the power of God at his disposal who comes before the Ancient of Days on clouds of glory. To be “the Son of Man” was to have all authority in heaven and on earth.

But do you know what Jesus said about himself? He said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45. Even though he had all authority over heaven and earth, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, humbled himself and became obedient to death on the cross to pay the price we deserve to pay for our sins. And if you will only trust Jesus, you’ll find that even though you deserve to be God’s enemy because of your sins, you’ll instead be God’s friend, God’s child. Not because of anything you’ve done, but because of what Jesus has done; because Jesus Christ died to pay the debt you owe.

And to get back to the point of our passage, to whom did Jesus have to submit to die and become our ransom? We mention his name every third Sunday in the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate …”

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, and he was the one who ordered Jesus Christ’s death on the cross. But do you remember the exchange Jesus and Pilate had before Jesus died? It’s found in John 19:9-11a: “[Pilate] entered his headquarters … and said to Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. **10**So Pilate said to him, ‘You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?’ **11**Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.’”

Before you were ever commanded to submit, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man who has authority over the universe, ***submitted to the governing authorities*** instituted by God (and not even good government, but the vile, corrupt, and oppressive Roman government). And my goodness, if the Son of Man can submit, we can strive to respect and honor those in authority over us. ***Besides, where would be if Jesus didn’t submit when he had the chance?***  We’d be lost in our sins. Jesus submitted to Pilate and to the horrible death he ordered to save us! When you submit to the government, always remember that ultimately you’re trusting the God who loves you and forgives you and in Jesus Christ died for you.

And just in case some of you still think I’m suspect because I prayed for Joe Biden this morning, let me read something Cal Thomas wrote a nearly thirty years ago. Cal Thomas is a very conservative commentator. He was vice president of the Moral Majority movement in the 1980s. His columns have run in newspapers all over the country. But this is what he wrote, “Christians have a responsibility to slow the spoilage of the kingdom of this world (to be ‘salt’ in the words of Jesus) … but they cannot do this through political power alone. It is too late for that. Trying to force their ideas on a reluctant public from the top down will only earn Christians further revulsion and rejection for all the wrong reasons … ***Moral power, not political power, is the superior force.*** If Christians will begin living what they claim to believe (loving your enemies, praying for those who persecute you, being a friend to sinners, even … hated liberals [his words]) a new kind of power would be unleashed on this land. It would be a power that no one could stop. It might produce something called ‘revival,’ which could create the social conditions Christians say they want, but cannot achieve by themselves.” That was true thirty years ago, it was true in the time of Paul, and it’s true today. AMEN. Let’s pray together.