

# *The Politics of Jesus*

## *Part 2 – America, God’s Servant*

Romans 13:1-7

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 25, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

Here’s what one commentator had to say about this passage from Romans 13:

This text has implications for war and peace, dictators and totalitarianism, concentration camps and gulags, revolts and revolutions, laws and law enforcement, political activism and civil disobedience, elections and lobbying, voting and paying taxes, speed limits and seat belts, stop signs and baby seats.<sup>1</sup>

Do I have your attention? Let’s listen to the Word of God from Romans 13.

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**<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup>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; <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. <sup>7</sup>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. (Romans 13:1-7, NRSV)**

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Americans of all political persuasions have become increasingly cynical about politics. A recent survey from the Pew Research Center reveals what every other

survey of its kind reveals, that public trust in government is at a historic low. Only 17% of Americans trust Washington to do what’s right.<sup>2</sup> In a recent Forbes study of America’s most and least trusted professions, nurses ranked #1, with an 84% approval rating. By contrast, only 8% of people say they trust members of Congress. Politicians ranked at the bottom of the list, just below car salesmen.<sup>3</sup>

Politicians have been using campaign slogans for years to make promises to voters in clever ways that can be remembered. Abraham Lincoln once promised, “Vote yourself a farm and horses.” If elected, William McKinley promised to deliver “Patriotism, Protection and Prosperity!”. Warren Harding guaranteed a “Return to Normalcy.” That slogan might actually work today. Herbert Hoover: “A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.” More recently Barak Obama told us, “Yes We Can!” Hillary Clinton guaranteed she will make us “Stronger Together.” This year Donald Trump tells us he will “Keep America Great” while Joe Biden tell us he can help “Restore the Soul of the Nation.”

It’s no wonder that we’re cynical. Who among us believes that, no matter who is elected in November, in four years that person will either make American great or restore America’s soul. If I ever ran for president, I think I’d just be honest. “Jeff Chapman: I will do the very best I can!” I wouldn’t get elected, but at least I wouldn’t make any promises I couldn’t keep.

As cynical as we can become about government, try and imagine a world without government. It’s not hard. There are places in our world today where the government has totally collapsed and we see the chaos that ensues. When I was a kid we played a lot of sandlot football. We’d get ten or twelve guys together and find a patch of grass or even a stretch of pavement, and we’d go at it. Before the game started, however, even before we picked teams, we always had to establish the rules. Where were the sidelines and the end zones? Those two trees, or a couple of backpacks, or a manhole cover had to be clearly designated. What was needed

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, “Subjection to God and Subjection to the State” (Part 1), *Desiring God*, June 12, 2005, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/subjection-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/01/11/americas-most-least-trusted-professions-infographic/#3dd89f067e94>

for a first down? Two completions was usually the rule. How many ‘alligators’ or ‘Mississippi’s’ did you have to count before rushing the quarterback. One-hand touch, two-hand touch, or if there were no adults around, maybe tackle. A group of 12-year-olds playing sandlot football absolutely needed rules. Truth be told, we really could have used a referee to enforce the rules.

In a way, human governments are like referees set up to not only make the rules but enforce them. In human society this is absolutely essential because humanity is sinful and selfish by nature. James Madison once wrote, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Men are not angels, nor are women, and so a society without government always descends into anarchy, a Latin word that literally means “without a ruler”. History bears this out. Many people would prefer to live in a totalitarian state rather than a state without any government whatsoever where everybody just gets to set his or her own rules. Thankfully, those aren’t the only two options.

This is why God’s Word is crystal clear here and elsewhere when it declares that human government is a good and necessary thing. In fact, human government is God’s idea. In Paul’s words, **“there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”** God loves this world. It’s his world. And God wants his world well-ordered. God loves people best in creation, and so he created human governments to promote human flourishing. Remember last week I defined politics as the way people relate to one another in society. Well, God wants politics to promote the common good of all people, that each person in society is free to flourish and grow and enjoy privileges and peace.

This doesn’t always happen, of course, and never happens perfectly. Human governments are deeply flawed, and we’ll address that reality and our necessary response to it in a minute. For now, just know that Paul understands this. He’s not naïve to the potential for corruption when he writes that all governments are instituted by God. In fact, Paul wrote this letter to the Romans during the reign of an emperor named Nero, whose 14-year rule as Caesar was marked by tyranny, extravagance and debauchery. This is the emperor who falsely blamed Christians for the great fire in Rome and burned many of them to death on crosses to provide illumination at night in his royal gardens. So let’s be clear that Paul is not saying here that God has personally appointed all leaders and is personally responsible for all their behavior, or even that such leaders are never to be resisted. What Paul is stating

here is a divine ideal, not a human reality. God has set up governments for the good of his world. Tragically, they too often fail to fulfill their purpose and, as a result, will be held accountable some day.

Nevertheless, the divinely-established purpose of human government is (ideally!) to promote human flourishing by punishing those who do wrong and rewarding those who do good. Again, think about a referee in a football game. If you play by the rules and score a touchdown, he sticks his arms in the air and rewards you with 6 points. But if you break the rules, he throws his yellow flag at you and takes away yardage from your team. In the previous chapter of Romans, Paul declared, **“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”**<sup>4</sup> Private vengeance is forbidden for Christians. Punishment is ultimately God’s job, and one of the ways that God brings consequences for sinful behavior in this world is through his instrument of government. You speed recklessly on the freeway and you get a ticket or lose your driving privileges. This is the way God wants it. If you do something worse, you might have to spend time in jail. God has given government the right and responsibility of carrying out justice. In Paul’s words, **“[Government] is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.”**

Paul also says that government should reward those who do good. **“Do what is good,”** he says, **“and you will receive its approval.”** If you think about it, our government does this all the time. When you and I follow the rules we enjoy an incredible number of rights, privileges and freedoms in this nation.

What we need to understand is that the role of government is sacred in our world. Again, Paul says that human government is God’s servant. That word for ‘servant’ in the original Greek is the word ‘diakonos.’ You might recognize that word. It’s where we get our word ‘deacon’, a word that literally referred to one who runs errands for another. I know we don’t often think this way, but God’s intent is that those who serve in the government are called to God’s ministry! Legislators, civil servants, state workers, police and firefighters, social workers, IRS workers, you all are just as much ministers of God as I am. To work for the government is a sacred calling. The Bible is even full of plenty of examples of God using pagan governments to run his errands! In Jeremiah 27:6 God says, **“Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve**

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:19 (This and all scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.)

him.” Governments, all governments, are God’s servants.

It’s for this reason that Christians ought to be make the best citizens of anybody. Right? Not because we are necessarily more patriotic or civic-minded than others, but because we do out of obedience to God what others often do only out of choice or compulsion. American citizens, for example, are legally obligated to pay taxes. Jesus last week<sup>5</sup>, and Paul this week, make clear to the church that we should pay the tax that is due. Many Americans, however, will try to get out of paying taxes if they can. You get paid in cash for a job you do, but because nobody will ever know if you don’t report it, and because not reporting it will benefit you personally, you don’t pay the tax. But as a follower of Jesus, when I pay taxes on income like that, I’m not doing it only out of obedience to the law, but ultimately out of obedience to Jesus who sees exactly what I’m doing if I refuse to honor the authority he has set up over me in this world.

When Paul calls us here to be “subject” to governing authorities, he uses a word that implies *voluntary* submission. I Peter 2:13-14 captures this well: **“For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.”** We voluntarily subject ourselves to governing authorities *for the Lord’s sake*, out of reverence for Christ who is our greater King. So we drive the speed limit, follow building codes, keep only two adult salmon per person and have no more than four king salmon in our possession during California’s salmon season, keep our grass cut, don’t put anything but water down the street drains, smog-check our cars, avoid texting while driving, and pick up after our dogs, all *for the Lord’s sake*. As Paul says in verse 5, we are subject **“not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.”**

Christians should also be people who want government to succeed, no matter who’s in office. Sadly, that’s not a very common sentiment these days, even in the church. But we should pray for our leaders, whoever they are. In 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy Paul urges us that, **“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”**<sup>6</sup>

I recently came across this prayer in daily guide for prayer our church has often used:

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:15-22

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 2:1-2

<sup>7</sup> *Seeking God’s Face*, written and compiled by Philip R. Reinders (Baker Books, 2010), 699.

Great God, in today’s world it’s fair game to ridicule, second-guess, lampoon, mock, and generally disrespect our leaders. Because you have appointed them, give me genuine respect for my leaders, defending their persons, bearing with their limits, and praying for their success.<sup>7</sup>

Can you pray that prayer for our current president, Donald Trump? Can you also pray it for our current governor, Gavin Newsom? Can you pray it for whoever gets elected in nine days? If Paul could tell Christians of his day to pray for Nero, do you think that somehow we might get a pass in our day? American statesman, Daniel Webster, once said, “Whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens.” He’s right. We should be patriots in the highest sense, but probably the sort of patriots that spend more time washing feet and on our knees praying than, waving flags and posting opinions on social media.<sup>8</sup> We are to be patriots, but humble patriots who serve and love and give and pray.

But what about when government fails to live up to its God-ordained mandate, as it always does to some extent and sometimes does to great extent? Are we always called to give blind devotion to those in civic power regardless of how they behave? After all, Paul does say here in verse 2, **“Whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”**

Michael Cassidy is a South African Christian who founded African Enterprise, an organization that has been long committed to sharing the gospel in Africa. In October of 1985, he was granted an interview P.W. Botha, the South African President at the time. Michael Cassidy was working feverishly alongside others to see the unjust system of apartheid dismantled, and so in the interview he hoped to receive from the nation’s leader some sign of repentance and hope. He would be bitterly disappointed. In fact, as soon as he walked into the room the President stood and began reciting portions of Romans 13. In Michael Cassidy’s own words, “He evidently imagined that this passage was enough to justify unequivocal support of the Nationalist Government’s apartheid policy.”<sup>9</sup>

Few passages in the scriptures have been as misused as this one. Yes, governments and their leaders are appointed by God and given authority to lead, even to punish and reward. But this is not *carte blanche* for

<sup>8</sup> Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Zondervan, 1987), 251.

<sup>9</sup> Cited by John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (InterVarsity, 1994), 341-342.

those who govern to act however they choose. Again, the standard is human flourishing, and not just of some citizens but *all* citizens. In verse 4 Paul says that government is **“God’s servant for your good.”** Sadly, governments and their leaders often forget this, even in America.

I know some of us like to think about America as a Christian nation. It’s not. It never has been. It’s not supposed to be. Biblically, the church is the only Christian nation. Nations cannot be Christians, any more than books, or music, or businesses can be Christians. Only people can be Christians. Furthermore, did you know that in 1776, the year the Declaration of Independence was signed, only 17% of Americans were worshipping members of a Christian church? That’s less than 1 in 5! Many of our founding fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, were either Deists or Moralists. This is reflected in our most cherished documents. The Declaration of Independence, for example, contradicts God’s Word when it states: “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” This was written by men who, many of them, believed that God created the world but then stepped back and left it to function on its own.

You see, the American government, like all human governments, regularly needs the same reminder that Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, needed when he put Jesus on trial: **“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.”**<sup>10</sup> When human governments faithfully use their authority they are to be honored and submitted to. But when they fail to do so they are to be resisted, even by the church. *Especially by the church!* And not just when our ability to flourish as citizens is compromised, but when the ability of anybody to flourish is compromised! Remember, we are commanded to love our neighbors, all our neighbors, as we love ourselves. That even means that when the flourishing of our nation compromises the flourishing of other nations in our world, we also need to resist our government because Jesus tells us that our neighbors are not limited to those who share our ethnicity or nationality.<sup>11</sup>

There is certainly no shortage of precedence for Spirit-led civil disobedience in scripture. Think of the midwives in Egypt who refused to carry out Pharaoh’s orders to murder all Hebrew newborns. Exodus 1:17 declares, **“The midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.”** Think of

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the Jewish exiles in Babylon who refused to bow down in worship to the statue of King Nebuchadnezzar, even though their decision meant certain execution.<sup>12</sup> Think of Queen Esther who decides to approach the throne of King Xerxes without permission so that she can plead for her people, even though such an action carried with it the punishment of death.<sup>13</sup> And when the ruling council ordered Peter and the other apostles to stop talking publicly about Jesus, Peter responded, **“Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”**<sup>14</sup>

Our own nation is filled with examples of civil disobedience carried out by followers of Jesus for the sake of the flourishing of all people. Most of the abolitionists who gave their lives to the ending of slavery were Christians, and many of them broke the law to help set slaves free. Francis Willard, who helped establish a national movement to secure the right of women to vote was a devout Christian, as were many of her co-workers in the suffrage movement. Rosa Parks, another Christian, broke the law when she sat in the front of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, as did so many other believers who carried out civil disobedience in the face of Jim Crow laws.

As Christians, of course, we have to be careful. We can’t resist or break laws simply because we find them inconvenient or because they hamper our own selfish interests. And Jesus certainly never allows any space for us to use violence in our resistance. Remember when Jesus told Peter, **“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”**<sup>15</sup> Still, at the end of the day we do serve a higher law. And when the law of the land is not in conformity with the values of God’s Kingdom, especially when injustice against the vulnerable is occurring, we must resist and do all we can to set things right. Augustine once said, “An unjust law is no law at all.” So when laws or lawmakers are clearly unjust, and civil disobedience has the potential to make a positive change, and when the Spirit of God indicates that the time is right, Christians are to resist. You might even say that this job belongs to the church more than it belongs to anybody else. In the words of Catholic writer and priest Richard John Neuhaus, the church is “the particular society within society that bears institutional witness to the transcendent purpose to which the society is held accountable.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> John 19:11

<sup>11</sup> Could this teaching be made any clearer than it is the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37?

<sup>12</sup> See Daniel 3:16-28.

<sup>13</sup> Esther 4:16: “After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”

<sup>14</sup> Acts 4:19-20

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 26:52.

<sup>16</sup> Cited by Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, 241.

In the end, as we submit to and honor human governments and their leaders for the sake of Christ, we must make sure to strike the right balance. On the one hand, we must not under-appreciate the government. It is God's servant, put here for our good, and we must give it its due. We must be the best citizens possible, doing more even than what is asked of us.<sup>17</sup> We must pray for our leaders, wanting them to succeed no matter who they are.

At the same time, however, we must not over-appreciate the government. When it crosses the line we must resist. In our context that at least means voting and activism, using our voices, our feet, and our dollars. Sometimes it can also mean civil disobedience in instances where following God's law requires us to violate human law.<sup>18</sup>

The great Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge articulated this tension beautifully when he said, "The gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy." A more modern voice, James K.A. Smith, put it this way: "The church is not the state, but the church bears witness to the state, and sends saints from its formative space to be a leavening organism in the political realm, authority that exists apart from you. *We pledge allegiance ultimately to you. You are our hope, you alone, because of what you have done, and are doing, through Jesus Christ, your Son.*

*But you have placed us in this nation and this time. You have given us this good land as our heritage. Make us always remember your generosity and constantly do your will. Bless our land with honest industry, sound learning, and an honorable way of life. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way.*

*We pray this day for those who govern among us. We pray for our President, for members of Congress. We pray for our Governor and other state leaders. We pray for our Mayor, and all those who lead here in our own city. May each of our leaders never forget that they would have no authority if not given it by you. Give all in authority the wisdom and strength to know your will and to do it. Help them remember that they are called to serve the people, all the people, as lovers of truth and justice.*

*We ask you, Lord, to bless the courts and the magistrates in our land. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

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hoping against hope to bend the kingdom of this world towards the Kingdom of God."

This is a beautiful vision. It's the vision we receive from God's Word. Sadly, there are too many places these days in our own nation where the church has compromised its witness by either under-appreciating or over-appreciating the government, either disregarding or disrespecting it, or getting in bed with it for personal gain. That is not our call as followers of Jesus, the one true King who demands our total allegiance. Instead, as we serve our government, especially in these trying days, let us do so humbly, submitting when Jesus tells us to submit and boldly resisting when Jesus tells us to resist. All of it, of course, for his sake.

Amen.

*Sovereign and Loving God, we declare this morning that you alone are King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Every human government and every human leader is subject to you and has no*

*that they may perceive the truth and administer the law impartially as instruments of your divine will. We pray in the name of him who will come to be our ultimately judge, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*As we approach this election, guide us not only to elect the candidates who will best promote human flourishing for all people, but also to respect neighbors whose views differ from ours, so that without partisan anger, we may work out issues that divide us, and elect candidates to serve the common welfare; through Jesus Christ the Lord.*

*And as we pray that our government, and all governments on this earth, would act as your servants, we pray that we, your church, would act as your servants as well, fulfilling our function. Help us to encourage and support our government and, when necessary, resist and challenge our government when it violates your law. In all of it, help us to act with love, seeking the best even for our enemies. May we be the light of the world you call us to be, a city on a hill that shines hope to all who would receive it.*

*All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew 5:41.

<sup>18</sup> I'm borrowing heavily in this last paragraph from an excellent teaching series by Pastor Ken Robertson entitled "The Gospel & Politics" which

## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Romans 13:1-7 again. What stands out to you from this passage?
2. Paul says several times in this text that human governments are God's servants. What does he mean by this? Is America God's servant? What about Russia, South Korea and Syria?
3. What is the role of human governments from God's perspective?
4. How would you describe the relationship between the church and the state, not just in America but in every nation? What does this text teach us about how God sees that relationship?
5. God's Word encourages us to pray for our leaders in government. (See 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:1-2 among others.) Do you pray for our local, state and national leaders, even the ones you would like to vote out of office? Why or why not?
6. At what point do you believe American Christians should practice civil disobedience, resisting the government and its laws? Can you think of examples?
7. Presbyterian Theologian Charles Hodge once wrote, "The gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy." What do you think he meant?
8. How does this scripture and message change the way you are approaching the election next week?

**Suggested Scriptures for the Week**, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday: Joel 1 / Psalm 57  
 Tuesday: Joel 2 / Psalm 58  
 Wednesday: Joel 3 / Psalm 59  
 Thursday: Amos 1 / Psalm 60  
 Friday: Amos 2 / Psalm 61  
 Saturday: Amos 3 / Psalm 62  
 Sunday: Amos 4 / Psalm 63