



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Subject to the Governing Authorities

Romans 13:1-7

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Over the course of these last few weeks we've been looking at what Paul has to say in Romans 12 about how the love we've been taught by Jesus, the love the Spirit has poured into our hearts, works out in practical ways. We are the people of God. We are his new creation—even if the work of renewal isn't completed yet. We've been given a glimpse of the world as it *will be* transformed by the redeeming love of God made manifest in Jesus and his cross. We've had a taste of what Creation set to rights looks like. (I'd say it's a small taste because it's limited to what God has done in our lives as individuals and as his Church, but the fact is that the renewing work of the Spirit in the human heart really is no small thing!) We know what God has in store, we live in hope of his new world, we're the bearers and stewards of the good news about his kingdom. What does it look like to *live that out*? So Paul started with what it looks like to live out the love the Spirit has given us in the Church. Last week we looked at what it looks like as we live that love in the wider community and world around us. In the process, Paul raised an important point. He said that we, as far as we are able, should live peaceably with everyone and then he said that we should not avenge ourselves. He quoted from Deuteronomy 32: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord".

That's easy to say, but how does it work out? As much as we may like to cheer on Superman and Batman in their vigilante quests for justice, they're fantasy. In the real world, vigilante justice results in chaos. If

we're to live peaceably in our communities, we need to put our swords away. Vengeance belongs to God. That said, he's also delegated to governing authorities to see that justice is done in an orderly way that—we pray—fosters peaceful communities. But that raises a related issue and one that ought to really stand out for us as people who live in the overlap of history, as the old age passes away and God's new age breaks in: How are we as Christians to relate to those governing authorities? The core, the foundation of the gospel is that Jesus is Lord—he and no other. And for Paul to proclaim that Jesus is Lord was to say that Caesar was not. Nero ruled the empire that Paul knew—an evil man who claimed to be divine. To proclaim the good news about Jesus was bound to bring conflict and it's still bound to bring conflict. Our rulers today don't claim to be gods—at least not usually—but they've accrued to themselves power that even Nero could only dream of and we live in an increasingly secular society that, instead of looking to God to supply its needs, increasingly looks to the State as the great provider and solver of all of our problems. Even Christians who profess to trust in God, more and more, put their trust in the State. Years ago I listened to an interview with the Christian philosopher, Francis Schaeffer. He was asked what he thought the single greatest challenge to the gospel was in our age. His answer was "Statism"—the belief that that State will solve all of our problem.

So how does Paul say we, as Christians, should relate to the governing authorities? This is the subject of Romans 13:1-7. Before I read it, though, I think some context is in order. Think about Paul's experience with the governing authorities. First, Nero ruled the empire from his palace in Rome. Now, at the time Paul was writing this, it was early in Nero's reign. Nero wasn't all that bad in those early years. Later in his reign he'd pin all of Rome's problems on Christians.

People already thought Christians were scum—they preached a Lord who wasn't Caesar after all, which was very subversive and unpatriotic!—and in a few years open persecution would break out. Nero would have Christians thrown to the lions and would crucify others, cover them in pitch, and set them on fire to light his gardens. Paul knew that persecution was coming, if not from Nero, then from another Roman king. And consider Paul's experiences in the past. In Acts 16 Paul ran into a slave girl who was possessed by a demon. She was able to tell fortunes and her owners made money off of her abilities. Paul cast the demon out and ruined their scheme. False accusations of disturbing the peace and of preaching subversive ideas were brought against him. He and Silas were arrested, stripped, and beaten, before being imprisoned. That was Roman "justice" for Paul. Or consider his experience with Jewish "justice". In Acts 23 we read that he was brought before the Sanhedrin because of his preaching. Just for declaring that he was innocent, the high priest ordered him struck. When it looked like some members of the council might vote to let Paul go free, other members of the council collaborated with a group of thugs to have Paul ambushed on his way to the council the next day. They wanted Paul dead, no matter what. He only escaped because his nephew got wind of the plot and warned the centurion who was guarding Paul. Paul had plenty of other bad experiences with the governing authorities and here's what he has to say. Look at Romans 13:1-7.

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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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, 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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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.

Not really what you’d expect, eh? To a lot of people it sounds like Paul’s telling Christians: “Bow the knee to Caesar. Pay your taxes. Don’t ask any questions or make any trouble or you’ll have God to reckon with because Caesar is his guy.” There have been plenty of people who have and who still do take these verses, more or less, in that vein. Corrupt leaders who claimed to be Christian have used these verses to squelch criticism. Even today we see them appealed to—although often selectively. Some Christians will scream in protest when the wrong party is in power and then—as we’ve seen recently in my country—will trot out these verses to stop any criticism when their preferred party or person is in power. Brothers and Sisters, context is important. Scripture taken out of context can be a very dangerous thing. It’s important we read these verses in light of what Paul has just said at the end of Chapter 12, particularly what he said about forbidding Christians from seeking vengeance and taking justice into their own hands.

If we read this in light of Paul’s warning to Christians not to seek vengeance or vigilante justice, his key point here comes into focus. He’s not condoning evil leaders or evil governments. He’s not suggesting that

God doesn’t care about our welfare or the welfare of others under corrupt or evil regimes. He’s not saying every earthly ruler is honourable or that every tax is just. He’s not saying that might makes right. His key point is that God has delegate to our governors the authority for seeing justice done. He has not given it to us as individuals and not even to us as the Church. God has not given us the power of the sword. He’s given that power to Caesar to maintain order. As much as Caesar may fail in his task, to leave it to us would be even worse.

Do you remember what the last words of the book of Judges are? It says that there was no king in Israel and that everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Judges tells us the story of Israel between the conquest of Canaan and the time of the kings. When God rescued his people from Israel, he made it clear that he was to be their king. Israel was different from the nations. In fact, Genesis gets at this quite dramatically. Whereas the pagan cultures around Israel believed that their kings were gods or, at least, divinely appointed stand-ins for the gods with sole and absolute power to rule—sometime the kings were even given their office as part of the created order—Genesis teaches us that human beings were not created to rule other human beings. God created us to steward his Creation, but he Created us to do that under his authority and his rule. God is King. Earthly kings arose as the human situation disintegrated. Powerful men seized control. They brought order, but they did so often through oppression, corruption, and violence. Israel was to be different. She was to be the people who recognized God as King. But she didn’t. Maybe in theory, but not in practice. The book of Judges describes Israel in near-chaos and ends with that statement: “There was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” There was no earthly king—which leads us into the book of Samuel—but, more

importantly, Israel failed to acknowledge God’s kingship and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It was a mess. Judges described a very brutal time in Israel’s history—all because the people failed to acknowledge God as king.

In Samuel we read that the people appealed to God for a king. They—very foolishly—wanted to be like the other nations. God resisted and rebuked this. He warned the people that a king would tax them, conscript them, and make their lives generally miserable, —sound familiar?—but they insisted. And so God appointed Saul to be Israel’s king. He did well at first, but he abused his office. God removed Saul and appointed David in his place. David did well, he brought order, but even David made some horrible mistakes that cost the people dearly. Even the best of earthly kings will fail. Again, human beings were not created to rule other human beings. From David it was a steady slide downhill. Even in Israel the monarchy was a failure. The prophets said it over and over and over for the five-hundred years until the Babylonians finally put an end to it once and for all.

Human beings were not made to rule human beings. But since human beings have rejected God’s kingship, God has had to delegate his power to sinful human beings to keep some kind of order. Some are better than others. All are far from perfect. Some have horribly abused that authority. But this is the world *we* have made for ourselves in rejecting God. As Christians, Paul says, we are to recognise and submit to God’s delegated authority knowing that as bad as some rulers may be—until God’s project of renewal and recreation is complete—the alternative to earthly kings is worse. We are to be people who seek to live peaceably, who seek to make God’s new creation manifest in whatever small means we

can and being subject to our rulers is one way we do that.

Paradoxically, it's by submitting to our rulers that we manifest the revolution that Jesus has begun. Do you remember what I said last week about making sure that we're squeaky-clean? What I meant by that is that we need to live our lives in a such way that when we are an offense to others, the offense is strictly the offense of the gospel confronting the fallen and rebellious world. Jesus promised persecution. Paul knew persecution first hand. Even as he writes that the governing authorities reward good and punish evil, he knew first hand that sometimes doing good—proclaiming the gospel—runs afoul of the governing authorities and will get you beaten and land you in prison. He also said to live peaceably with everyone—but also added that we are to do so to the extent that we can. We are to be good citizens so far as we can without compromising the gospel. If you're going to make a ruckus, make sure it's a gospel ruckus—a ruckus over something that really matters, not a ruckus over earthly treasures that moth and rust will eventually destroy.

I suspect that Paul may have had in mind the arrangements that the Jews had with Rome. Usually, when Rome conquered a people, they required those conquered people to erect statues of the emperor and to offer him incense. It was their civil religion and by it they sort of pledged allegiance to Caesar and acknowledged his rule and his divinity. The Jews refused. God was their king. The Romans tried to force the issue and it didn't go well. And so the two parties reached an agreement. Caesar would keep his statues out of the temple, he would not require the Jews to offer incense to him, which they considered idolatry, and in return the Jews said that they would pray for Caesar.

We ought to follow their example, at least that far. Each day we pray,

“Almighty God, the fountain of all goodness, we humbly beseech thee to bless our Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth, the Parliaments in all her dominions, and all who are set in authority under her; that they may order all things in wisdom, righteousness, and peace, to the honour of thy holy name, and the good of thy Church and people; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Listen to that petition again: “That they may order all things in wisdom, righteousness, and peace, to the honour of thy holy name, and the good of thy Church and people”. Whether our rulers acknowledge God or not, whether they acknowledge that their authority comes from him, whether they rule well or poorly, this is what we ought to be praying in the knowledge that it is we who have made a mess of this world—not just our rulers—it is we who, in rejecting God as king in the first place, have necessitated he put human rulers over us, and trusting that he remains sovereign and will finally set everything to rights.

So what do we do when our human rulers fall short? I said that Paul isn't making any excuses for them and he certainly doesn't mean by any of this that we are to obey even if it means compromising the lordship of Jesus or God's commands. Our rulers have an obligation to honour God, who has delegated his authority to them to ensure that we are secure in our life, our property, and our liberty. Think of our prayer for the Queen that we'll pray shortly—a petition that she be faithful in punishing wickedness and vice while maintaining true religion and virtue. When our rulers abuse their authority and dishonour God. When they abuse their authority and rob their people of life, property, and liberty we can follow Paul's example. This is why I noted the two incidents from Acts 16 and 23. When Paul and Silas were beaten and arrested, the magistrate tried to release them quietly the following morning. He knew he'd abused his authority to please the

crowd. Paul would have none of it. He insisted on remaining in his prison cell and forced a confrontation with the magistrate. Similarly, in Acts 23, Paul rebuked the high priest and, as he was dragged from one official to another, eventually appealing to Caesar, Paul never failed to point out the duty each of these men had to see that real justice was done.

Brothers and Sisters, we have an obligation to be peaceable people. Again, God has not given us the power of the sword. But we are still called to hold our leaders accountable. If Paul could be so outspoken to despots, how much more ought we to speak—and to vote—in a democracy? We may be outnumbered, but we still have an obligation to speak for truth and for justice and to call our leaders to account for their use of the authority God has given to them. And, when their laws would cause us to sin, we have an obligation to civil disobedience. The point at which we move from speaking out to refusing to comply isn't always easy—and Christians have and will disagree. We have to carefully weigh the issue in each case. We're called to live in peace and civil disobedience upsets that peace. If we're going to disobey, the matter has to be important enough to justify it. I can't just be something we don't like. It must be something that violates God's laws or Christians ethics at a deep and serious level. I think Paul gives us some help when he tells us to pay our taxes.

He would have likely been referring to the taxes that were assessed on the people who lived in the city of Rome. There were two types of taxes. Some were direct and some were indirect. The indirect taxes eventually led to riots. Nero promised to do away with the indirect taxes—and, like so many other rulers who make promises about taxes, failed to keep that promise. But Paul urged the Roman Christians to pay up instead of contributing to the civil unrest. Again, I think this helps

us to get our feet on the ground. We have all sorts of different taxes as well today. Some are basically user fees for the services we use. We may have ideas for how these things might be better managed, but these taxes aren't inherently unjust. On the other hand, we have an income tax. Governments love income taxes because of the enormous revenue they generate, but these taxes violate one of the most foundational principles of godly governance. To tax a person's wages is to make that person a slave. That is unjust and wrong. We ought to speak out against this sort of thing. In a participatory government, we ought to vote against this sort of thing. But in the end, Paul would tell us to pay up so long as the tax is in place. As Christians we have more important priorities. Jesus tells us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. To lay up treasures on earth where rust and moths eat them up is foolish. If Caesar wants your money, give him your money. While pagans may treat money like a god, we Christian do not. If you have the opportunity, tell Caesar that such a tax it's wrong. But to refuse to pay it means one of two things: It means taking up a sword against Caesar—something we are not authorized to do. Or it means undermining our reputation for being peaceable people of the gospel. Friends, be good citizens so far as you are able to be good citizens without compromising your gospel witness. Giving your money to pay an unjust tax doesn't compromise the gospel. Jesus said, "If someone takes your tunic, give him your coat as well." Save the civil disobedience for the time when Caesar demands you bend the knee to him, when he demands your service in unjust wars, or when he demands your compliance in something like racial injustice or the murdering of the unborn.

Brothers and Sisters, part of our gospel witness is our faith in God's sovereignty. This was something Paul knew well. Think of the Old

Testament prophets. They loudly and fiercely denounced the pagan kings that threatened Israel, but those same prophets also reminded Israel that the Lord was working through those wicked and idolatrous nations and kings and that he was working through them for Israel's long-term good. God is equally sovereign and equally working for good whether we're ruled by a Harper or a Trudeau, whether there's a Trump or a Clinton south of the border and even under a Stalin or a Hitler or a Nero. This was the message of the prophets. It doesn't mean a ruler is good—or bad—but that God is at work and we know that in the long-term his plans are good: the restoration of his Creation. Our vision and knowledge and wisdom are limited. Rarely will be able to see what God is up to, but we can know that even in the midst of persecution, we can trust in God. We see this tension in the scene as Jesus stood before Pilate. Pilate reminded Jesus that he had the power to put him to death and Jesus responded by explaining to Pilate that the power to do just that was power that God had delegate to him in the first place. Pilate went on to abuse that power, but God remained sovereign and forgiveness and life were unleashed and Caesar's kingdom overturned as a result.

Jesus now calls us to follow him in loving sacrifice. Remember what Paul wrote at the beginning of Chapter 12? "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." In the generations that immediately followed Paul, those brothers and sisters, many of whom were martyred for their faith, truly sacrificed themselves. They sacrificed their reputations by associating with the lowly—with women, with slaves, with the poor, with foreigners, with outcasts. They sacrificed their money to care for each other, to care for widows and orphans, and to care for

infants abandoned to die. They sacrificed their lives for refusing to bend the knee to Caesar's false lordship. Like Jesus, they went to their deaths at the hands of wicked kings. But a strange thing happened as a result. The love of the true Lord, who gave his life for the sake of his enemies became manifest through the sacrifices of his people. His light shone in the darkness and the pagans—even Caesar himself—couldn't but notice. Brothers and Sisters, let us follow their example.

Let us pray: Father, to follow Jesus example, to offer ourselves as living sacrifices is not an easy thing to do. We acknowledged in the Collect earlier that we cannot do anything good without you. Continue your work of renewal in our hearts and minds that we might manifest your love, your mercy, and your grace to all around us, giving us the courage to live sacrificially, to be uncompromising even in the face of violence or death, and to give us the wisdom to know how to face the challenges of the earthly kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.