

Why Government? Romans 13:1ff.

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What do families often say when they sit down for Thanksgiving dinner? *Hey, let's have a nice time. How about we agree that we are not going to talk about religion or politics?* Why those two subjects in particular? Because they are the most divisive, the most opinionated, the most rancorous subjects of all. Primarily because they represent the two places human beings place their faith and therefore their worship. You can tell when you are getting close to the true god of someone's life when they are ready to throw down about it. These days, people's politics is their religion.

As we see a presidential election approaching, so also approaches our society's every-four-years-hope in a new messiah. Of course, they all prove terribly disappointing because this world was not made for sinners to rule it. But the perfect king Jesus will rule in an absolute monarchy.

For now, we live in a shattered Eden, filled with sinners and ruled by sinners. This creates tensions for Christians as we live with one foot in the kingdom of God and the other in the kingdom of man. Romans has carefully taught us how to have our foot in the kingdom of God by the gospel of Jesus and justification by faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Underpinning Romans 13 is Romans 1-11's explanation of the gospel.

Until we die, we will continue to live in the kingdom of man and deal with the shards of a shattered humanity. We see its effects all around us with corruption and abuse of power on all levels of government, in all quadrants of the world. As is often said, *power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. This is seen in the big kingdoms like Russia or China to little fiefdoms like Lichtenstein or your school's PTO. The story is always the same: sinners governing sinners sinfully.

God's people have struggled to understand God's governance plan for human society ever since the Fall. The most basic component of society, marriage, is often a power struggle. Families and nations often at war with themselves. All the revolutions and coups and wars of history are the consequence of mankind rejecting divine rule and seeking self-rule, self-governance, self-worship.

We are not the first Christians to struggle to understand all this. Augustine wrote *The City of God* in response to the turmoil when the 1,000 year reign of Rome was ended.

"Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love..."¹ (Augustine)

¹ Saint Augustine (Bishop of Hippo), Marcus Dods, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine: A New Translation, Volume 2* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1888), 47.

Rome or Jerusalem, to which city do we turn for hope? Or in 2020, to which political party, which politician? Is my hope in Washington or is my hope built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness?

Did I realize in the winter of 2017 when we began Romans that we would land in chapter 13 at either the absolute best or absolute worst possible moment to teach on church and state? No. But God is sovereign. We come to this subject with our heads spinning with controversies about the role of government, the wearing of masks, the opening of schools, and governmental policies and policing.

I want this series to be light not heat. We don't need more heat these days. Some of this won't be new. Judging by the nonsense some Christians post on their social media, many Christians have never seriously considered what the Bible says about the role of government. This series is not going to explain what Democrats say or what Republicans say or what Libertarians say is the role of government. We want to know what God says and align ourselves with truth that transcends the petty politics of America or Brazil or India or Northwest Indiana. All these kingdoms of man are passing away, but the word of God remains forever.

"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." (Romans 13:1-6 ESV)

Is this all the Bible says about government? No. But it, along with Jesus' words, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," (Mark 12:17) form the basic structure of a Christian worldview of government. This framework has largely shaped the philosophy of government in Western Civilization. That's a big claim but I hope by the time we are all done, you'll see why I say that.

God's Plan for Human Government

What is human government? *God's common grace for the organization of human society.* Government is not man's idea. Government is God's created purpose for organizing humanity.

Oversee human society

"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." (Romans 13:1)

Paul doesn't say, government is of the devil, or human government isn't God's will, or governmentless society is God's ideal. No. He affirms the rightful place of governing authorities in human society. There are some people who resent government implicitly and have a utopic vision of no oversight or societal organization at all. Remember that the darkest days in Israel's history were when there was no king and everyone did what was

right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). Human government was God's will for human society from the beginning.

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:28).

There is hierarchy and authority on earth before sin. Before the Fall. Of course, we see hierarchy in the Triune God himself with God the son rejoicing in his submission to God the Father. This authority structure is implanted by the Creator in every realm of the created order. Humans in creation. Humans in marriage. Humans in family. Humans in church community. There is governance and this is not inherently bad but inherently good. God called all his creation very good. It was pointed out to me recently that even among the sinless and perfect angels there is hierarchy and levels of authority.

We take from this that even if Adam and Eve had never sinned, there would be human government; a different kind and quality of government with God as universal king and shorter lines at the BMV.

Government itself is good. It is God's common grace for the organizing of human society. It provides structure for the orderly functioning of people, families, and nations.

Paul adds that this governing authority is authority granted by God himself. *"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."* (Romans 13:1) Some of you are like, *you mean good politicians, you know the ones that agree with me.* No. All authority including the bad ones like the Emperor Domitian who was the corrupt emperor at the time Paul wrote this. He and his successor Nero were maniac Christianity-hating emperors. Yet Paul says, *submit to the authorities* and Peter writes, *"Honor the Emperor."* (1 Peter 2:17)

All governing authority is a delegated earthly authority from God's divine authority. This is not to say God is the source of evil abuse of power or anything evil at all. Rather, governance in human society is a structure God established and continues to deputize.

Promote good in human society

"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." (Romans 13:3-4)

This is a hard truth for some of us to swallow as the old adage mocks, *"Hi. I'm from the government and I'm here to help you."* Sure you are. But that is government NOT the way it's supposed to be. How is it supposed to be? *"He is God's servant for your good."* A biblical government seeks to do good for its citizens, *"approving what is good."* Human government has many ways to promote human flourishing by incentivizing, or what Paul calls here *"approving,"* that which is morally and civically good. Human flourishing includes liberty and freedom, healthy marriages, families, successful parenting, and a thousand other ways government can promote good. How to go about that is a subject of much heated debate. We simply note that government by God's design is to be a help, not a hurt.

Wasn't it great during the vicious storm this week to know that local government officials were coordinating with the National Weather Service and local utilities and police and fire departments while the rest of us took shelter in basements? *I call that good.* Isn't it wonderful that as we speak government is overseeing the food chain and making sure fruits

and vegetables go from the farm to our tables safely? *I call that good*. Aren't we glad that government is protecting us with military and anti-terrorism and NSA to keep at bay people who would otherwise destroy us? *I call that good*. Aren't we thankful for oversight of monetary systems and commerce that affect our jobs and how we buy and sell? *I call that good*. In these, and innumerable other ways that we so often take for granted, government is functioning as God intended to allow human survival and flourishing.

Friends, the existence of government is not the problem. The sinful human beings actually doing the governing are the problem and always will be until King Jesus rules the earth. So, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is much to rightly criticize about government, but we mustn't criticize the existence of government for this is God's will for human society and will be forever.

Restrain evil and punish wrongdoers in society

"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... 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." (Romans 13:2-3, 4)

One critical role of government is the restraint of evil and the punishing of the wrongdoer. You see that in verses 2 and 4. Those who resist authorities and law should expect judgment; judgment that Paul says in verse 4 is an extension of God's justice and wrath. *"He is the servant of God, an avenger."* Let's just pause right there. Remember at the end of chapter 12 Paul urges non-retaliation for those who do wrong against us. How can we allow injustice against us to just pass? Leave room for God's wrath. God will avenge every wrong.

How does God avenge wrong done against us?

- The natural consequences of sin (and/or)
- Punishment from civil authorities (and/or)
- The Cross of Jesus
- Hell

If it's avenged on the cross then it's not avenged in hell. What's that doctrine? Substitutionary atonement. But God has so ordered human society that government acts to restrain sin. How?

How does God use government to restrain sin?

- Laws
- Threat of punishment
- Actual punishment

Let's just think about this a moment. Why do you drive the speed you do? There is a speed limit. That speed limit sign acts as a restraint. That is why they put these radar signs up around that tell you how fast you are going with the actual speed limit next to it. The law keeps me from going at warp speed everywhere. But then also the threat of punishment. This is the power of hidden radar cameras where unbeknownst to you, your picture is taken speeding and you get a ticket in the mail. Most of us don't want that so the threat of it makes us slow down (see a camera anywhere?). Then there is the actual punishment. If you've been pulled over and received a speeding ticket, how fast do you drive away from

the officer? Do you peel rubber? No. The punishment has humbled your lead foot for a week or five minutes.

This principle applies to the role government plays in all categories of crime, corruption, fraud, tax evasion, rape, murder, assault and battery, kidnapping, robbery, and many others. If there was no government, if there were no police, if there were no societal laws, there would be chaos and anarchy. See also the level of threat Paul highlights, *"for he does not bear the sword in vain."*

*"The sword was carried habitually, if not by, then before the higher magistrates, and symbolized the power of life and death which they had in their hands."*²

When I happen to sit by a police officer in a restaurant or walk behind them at the mall, I see the belt with all kinds of things that can inflict pain, but I mostly notice the gun. The sword in Paul's day was not for helping old ladies across the street. It was to handle the criminal accosting the old lady across the street. A sword could kill. The magistrate carries an ability to elevate force as high as is needed to serve and protect the innocent against the criminal.

Some may not like that, and some may wish police had more firepower. The point is that it is the right and duty of government to restrain evil and to punish the wrongdoer.

So, today in places of the world where criminals are doing crimes and government is not restraining them, that is a dereliction of duty on the part of the governing officials.

*"It is interesting that both Paul (in Romans) and Peter see civil government doing the opposite of what Satan does: civil governments are established by God 'to punish those who do evil,' but Satan encourages those who do evil! Civil governments are established by God 'to praise those who do good,' but Satan discourages and attacks those who do good."*³

Lawlessness is Satan's way of doing things. God is a God of order.

Some of you are desperate for application so let me give you one. Watch the news. Where government is restoring order and protecting the vulnerable from crime, it is doing what it should. Where government is failing to restrain evil and enabling wrongdoers, it is disobeying God's purpose.

See also that Paul praises the civil servant, in our case, the judge, the Sheriff, and the police officer. Quote, *"He is God's servant for your good."* (Romans 13:4) When police do not act as a servant for good, this is against God's design and we all grieve a terrible example of that in Minneapolis this summer. Depravity is seen in every category of society including civil servants.

At the same time, all those who serve society properly do so as God's servants and deserve our respect and honor. I think that needs to be said loud and clear with this solid biblical backing. I'll give you two examples from our church this summer.

² James Denney as quoted by John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 344.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), 38.

Back in June we got thinking about our law enforcement and their families and the extreme difficulties they are going through these days. Quietly, we gave a gift to every law enforcement family in our church (that we know of). We have many of them. Inside the card, was a gift card to a local steakhouse. We wanted to tell them we value them and honor what they do. Last week I sent each of them a note. Here is what it said,

Dear _____,

I hope this note finds you encouraged in your faith, home, and important work in law enforcement. A month or so ago we provided a gift card to you with the express purpose of letting you know how much Bethel Church respects your role in our community. If you haven't enjoyed that meal out yet, I hope you can sometime soon.

We are about to continue our series in Romans from chapter 13. In it, God's Word describes rulers and authorities over us as God's servants. Your role in protecting and serving our community finds its divine purpose in these verses. I hope you can hear these messages and derive their intended vision for your vocation.

I want to say thank you again for your service during these very challenging days.

*Our hearts and prayers are with you,
Pastor Steve on behalf of Bethel Church*

Why is the tone of this biblically appropriate? "*He is God's servant for your good.*" (Romans 13:4)

For those of you desperately wanting to know, can government make me wear a mask? What about all this pandemic stuff? Here's what I have to say, you'll have to join us against next week. Finally, may it be clear in this church and state series that government can organize humanity, but it can't save it. Politicians can lead a nation, but they can't save it. Jesus' death and resurrection did for us what no politician can do. Let's make sure our daily hope is in him.

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