

BeeTree Sunday
June 24, 2018
Off-Lectionary
Rev. Rob Carter

Prayer for Illumination

Romans 13

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.
Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed,
 and those who resist will incur judgment.
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;
 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.
Therefore one must be subject,
 not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.
For the same reason you also pay taxes,
 for the authorities are God's servants,
 busy with this very thing.
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.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another;
 for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder;
 You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment,
 are summed up in this word,
 "Love your neighbor as yourself."
 Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
 therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is,
 how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.
For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;
 the night is far gone, the day is near.
Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;
 let us live honorably as in the day,

not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness,
 not in quarreling and jealousy.
 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,
 and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

“Romans 13”

If you received and read the e-mail we sent out this past Thursday, then you already knew the morning text I’d be preaching on, as well as the topic. I share up front... it’s not a topic I necessarily want to preach on. I don’t particularly enjoy preaching on political topics. But just because I don’t necessarily jump to preach on political topics doesn’t mean I won’t or never should. One of the reasons I preach from the lectionary is because it forces preachers to explore passages they may otherwise ignore. Just as one of the reasons I occasionally jump out of the lectionary is because there are current events that simply must be explored.

For our Reformed tradition makes clear, we’re called—each and all of us—to view our world through the Gospel lens. We’re called to examine not just the personal, but also the communal and even the political through the way and will of God in Jesus Christ we find in Scripture. It doesn’t mean we’ll all come away from Scripture with the same interpretation, or apply it to our lives or our political perspectives in the same way. In fact, I’d argue it’s important that we don’t agree on all things. Just as it’s vitally important we be willing to talk about all things in order to explore how Scripture and our faith tradition might help us understand them better.

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And there is simply no running away from the topic before us today... an immigration struggle that has gripped the nation. I suspect you know what happened, as news spread of the federal government separating undocumented immigrant children from their families when they’re caught entering the U.S. illegally. As this news spread, a national and an ecclesiastical—or church—uproar ensued until the President signed an executive order putting an end to this practice.

Now, on a very personal level, I come clean regarding how offensive I found that practice to begin with; how deeply it troubled me as a Christian, as a parent, and as a former child counselor. I know that the mere act of forcibly separating a child from its family is traumatic enough to cause longstanding issues for that child.

But I don’t really want to talk about the nuances of that practice, or even what led up to it in the first place.

Rather, what I hope to explore today is the federal administration’s use of Scripture to defend this practice. It happened twice. First, a week ago this past Thursday, when discussing the separation of parents from children as a necessary byproduct of their “zero tolerance” enforcement, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said, “I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has

ordained them for the purpose of order... Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and lawful,” Sessions said.¹

Then, later that day when responding to a question regarding the Attorney General’s use of Scripture to defend the practice, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said it is, “very biblical to enforce the law.... That is actually repeated a number of times throughout the Bible,”² she said.

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Now... first things first... as we just read, in his letter to the church in Rome, Session is right. Paul does, indeed, call on the Romans to obey civil law, emphasizing that God has ordained the government to help achieve societal order. And Huckabee Sanders is also correct that the law plays a central role in Scripture, and that the law is enforced all throughout Scripture.

In fact, the law is the very hinge of God’s first covenant with God’s people Israel. In the very beginning of Scripture’s story, God promises to be Israel’s God and they promise to be God’s people. And at the center of their covenant relationship lies *the law of God*... the law God gives them to free them for life in all its fullness.

But let’s also be clear... the law of the Old Testament and Israel is not civil law. It is God’s law, which God enforces. So when Israel messed up or ignored the laws God had commanded them to keep, it wasn’t the government, but God who judged the people. Scripture says it was God who wrought judgment in splitting the nation of Israel in two, and bringing the Assyrians to conquer the north, and leading the Babylonians to conquer the south.

So make no mistake. The law is important to God. It’s the very first measure God used to instill order in creation and God’s people, giving the law to Israel as a gift that they might live in security and stability, enabling them to flourish into fullness of life. So yes... the law is incredibly important to God.

But... but... let’s also be clear. This is *God’s* law we’re talking about. The law of the Torah—something very different than the civil law Paul is referring to in Romans 13. And yet, our understanding of God’s law is crucial to our understanding of what Paul’s actually talking about in Romans 13.

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So as we now, at last, dig into Romans 13, what we find is, as Jeff Sessions noted, Paul talking about the law. And to be clear, in the beginning of the chapter, Paul’s clearly not talking about God’s law in the Torah, but about societal or civic law of the government. And what Sessions said is true. As we read in verse 1, Paul says, “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.”

¹ Jeff Sessions as quoted by Emily McFarlan Miller and Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service, USA Today, www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/06/16/jeff-sessions-bible-romans-13-trump-immigration-policy/707749002/.

² Sarah Huckabee Sanders as quoted by Adam Edelman, NBCNews, www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/sessions-cites-bible-defense-breaking-families-blames-migrant-parents-n883296.

I'm not gonna lie. This is a tough one. At first glance, this single verse, and even the next few verses that follow, they might seem antithetical to the gospel itself... almost as if Paul is saying we should subordinate the will and way of Jesus Christ to the law of the government. Because of this, Romans 13 verse 1 has been one of the most abused verses in all of Scripture. In fact, as I researched in preparing for this sermon, I found more than one scholar who essentially said that this very verse has possibly “caused more suffering than any other verse in the Bible.”³⁴ Because when you rip out this single verse from Paul’s letter, it reads as if Paul really is saying that disciples should do whatever the government tells you to do—regardless of its morality.

But here’s the thing. The Bible isn’t meant to be read by its individual verses. When we do that... when we take one or two verses out of the Bible and read them apart from what comes before and after these verses... it’s called *proof-texting*. It’s something preachers and churchgoers and, evidently, politicians all do—but we never do it faithfully. For every individual verse is part of its larger context. So to understand a verse of Scripture, we have to understand what comes before it... and after it.

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So in order to understand what Paul is saying in Romans 13: 1, we need to understand the bigger picture he is painting. And this is that bigger picture.

Romans is really a letter that Paul writes to a church in Rome. In it, Paul seeks to explain his theology—what he believes and what the Romans should believe about Jesus Christ, the grace of God, and the redemption of humanity.

It begins by Paul explaining how, under the law of the Torah—a gift God gave God’s people—we all would fall short. We’re all sinners, he explains, incapable of not sinning. But the good news of Jesus Christ is that, by his grace, we are forgiven of our sins and redeemed. The old is gone, Paul says. We don’t have to worry about keeping the Torah laws any more.

But that’s not because the old laws of the Torah are suddenly abolished. Rather, Paul explains that the law of the Torah has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ! And the law fulfilled in Jesus Christ, according to the Great Commandment given by Jesus himself, is summed up in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then to also love our neighbor as ourselves. On these two things, Jesus says, the entire law and the prophets hinge.

So it’s not that the Torah law doesn’t matter, Paul says, or that the law of the government is now the only law we should obey. Rather, Paul is saying that the law of love in Jesus Christ, and the grace of God in Jesus Christ, now fulfill the law of God.

That’s essentially the first part of Romans.

The second part is gets a bit more complicated. And as we see in our lesson today, part of this complication is that Paul actually believed that Jesus Christ was going to return practically any day—probably during his lifetime. Did you happen to catch how he references it? At the end he writes, “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

³ Calvin J. Roetzel, *Romans: A Letter for Today* (Pittsburg: The Kerygma Program, 2001, 2016), 75.

⁴ Paul Achtemeier, *Romans, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985).

He's saying—yes... we do believe that Christ and his salvation are nearer than ever before... because the day of his return will soon be coming.

It's something he not only believed, but something he taught to the churches he helped form. So scholars point out that, one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome in the first place was in part because he got word that some in the Roman congregation were beginning to ignore this world, in anticipation of the kingdom still to come. Some, undoubtedly, stopped paying taxes. I mean... if Jesus is coming back any day to fulfill God's will for creation, then why bother paying taxes to a worldly government. And others may have gone even farther... essentially withdrawing from civic responsibility in any way... withdrawing from participating in the common good of community, sense Jesus would be returning at any moment.

And here, in Romans 13, Paul offers a correction to that. He says, essentially, that yes—salvation is nearer than it ever has been. Yes, he does believe Jesus is coming back soon. But that's not a reason to ignore the government or the community around you. For the government, he explains, has been ordained by God to help establish and keep order and structure for the common good of all. So you still must abide by the laws of society, he says. You still must pay your taxes and participate in civic order.

So in this sense, yes, in Romans 13 Paul says, "Obey the laws, and respect the governments that God has ordained to rule, for the government is there to provide order and clarity in service to the common good.

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But here's the thing. Paul wasn't done. He goes on. And what he has to say is awfully important.

For once Paul tells the Romans that they still need to abide by the order of their current world, and obey the government of their current world, he then makes clear that civil or human law is ordained by God as it serves the law of God. Meaning, the law of God is still preeminent. Civil law is subordinate to God's law every day of the week. And Paul then reminds the Romans and us exactly what stands at the heart of God's law, reiterating the Great Commandment to love. Love God with all that we are and all that we have, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Except, Paul doesn't say it exactly like that. What he says is, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

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So I need to be clear. The Attorney General does not have it right. Neither does the White House Press Secretary. Paul's intention is not to claim that Christians should obey every law of the government regardless of what it does or says. And no, nowhere in Scripture do we read that followers of Christ are called or even urged to abide by laws or policies that stand in contrast to God's law of love.

Rather, in a very complicated part of a very complicated letter, Paul reminds disciples that we have a responsibility to abide by civil laws that support the common good because

love—our regard for others and the common good—is the foundational ethic of our faith in the first place.

And if we need further proof that Paul did not intend for every disciple to obey every law, we need only consider that Paul himself was arrested and imprisoned multiple times for disobeying government orders of his day. Just as Jesus Christ himself was tried and convicted and hung on a cross for sedition—for betraying the orders of the government.

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So instead of blindly following the words of politicians (and preachers, I might add)... And instead of turning a blind eye to unjust practices of our society—Romans actually makes the case that disciples are called—at all times and in all places—to seek the way of God in Jesus Christ... to do and behave and treat others in a way not as society would tell us, but as the God’s rule of love requires us.

It’s the very example we see played out over and over and over again throughout Scripture, wherein God perpetually strives to move people from a place of brokenness to wholeness; where God’s grace is always working to break down the walls of hostility and division within and around us; where God is forever helping sinners find grace... helping prodigals find their way home... helping the poor and the oppressed uncover their dignity and worth... helping the very last and the least find their way to the front and center of the kingdom.

And *any* law of *any* government that opposes this movement of love... any personal or communal practice that seeks to tear down rather than build up... any policy that seeks to harm rather than heal... that hurts the least and last among us... those who simply cannot fend for themselves... regardless of circumstance... well... I believe any such practice is clearly unbiblical, and calls for disciples’ resistance.

For as Paul himself says so clearly, friends, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor... for love is the fulfilling of the law.” Love. Love is the fulfilling of the law. Love... and nothing else.

May it be so.

Amen.