

GOVERNMENT IS GOD'S SERVANT ROMANS 13:3-5

In downtown Salt Lake City, at the entrance of the Public Safety Building, there is a stunning bronze sculpture of two hands side-by-side with their palms facing upward. In sign language this means, 'to serve', so the name of the sculpture is "Serve and Protect," a slogan that has been adopted by many police departments in the United States.

"Serve and Protect" summarizes God's intended role for *all* of government, according to the first part of Romans 13, the most comprehensive instruction on government and our relationship to it in the New Testament. We are exploring this subject for a few weeks because of the current events and attitudes in our nation in which governing authorities are playing a prominent role.

This is the fourth message in a series entitled, *Living Right Side Up in an Upside-Down World*, the second taken from Romans 13. We discovered last week (if we did not know it before) that this is not an easy passage for Americans to digest. Many of us have been taught, at a minimum, to be suspicious of government, and some of us have been conditioned to consider government our enemy.

So, when Paul begins the passage by commanding every one of us to submit to the governing authorities, we may bristle. We may quickly skim over the passage and look for something more palatable to ponder, or we may dismiss it as an archaic admonition given to people who did not know how to govern themselves. One NT scholar was so troubled by this passage that he simply decided Paul did not write it, but that it was later inserted into the text by a scribe who was sympathetic to the emperor.

These may be convenient methods of avoiding this challenging passage, but they are irresponsible. As disciples of Jesus we must humbly and willingly accept and do everything He says whether we like it or agree with it or not; whether we think it is good or beneficial or not. Ultimately, obedience to any command in Scripture is an act of faith—believing that God knows what is best for us, and that it will result in our well-being and his glory.

Last week, we focused on verses 1-2, where Paul says, ¹ *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.* After issuing the command to submit to governing authorities Paul states the primary reason we are to submit. It is because God put those authorities in their positions. The word, "instituted" means "arranged," "placed," or "caused." God did not just allow or permit them to be in their positions, he placed them there. So, if we resist them, we are resisting *God* and will be judged by Him.

If God is determined to judge those who resist governing authorities, this must be a matter of great importance to Him, and it ought to be of great concern to us. But Paul is not done. He goes on to give some further reasons why we should submit to governing authorities in **verses 3-4**. 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.*

The principle that stands out in this passage is part of a biblical worldview. Government is God's servant, and He established it for our *good*. When Paul wrote to Timothy about this same subject, he described what he meant by "good." He said, *"...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*” (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

God established government, which includes everyone from the head of state to the local police department, to provide a safe, peaceful, orderly, and stable environment. These things are important to God, and government is God’s servant to ensure them.

In the Greek text (Romans 13:4) the word *God* comes first in each clause, and Paul purposely does this for emphasis. He wants to assert that those in positions of civil authority are God’s servant. That may not be how they view *themselves* (some Roman emperors considered themselves gods, and some heads of state today have a similar self-image), but from God’s perspective they are servants. And that word, *servant*, describes *lowly* service, such as unskilled menial labor. However exalted a ruler may be in his own eyes, he/she is nothing more than a lowly servant before God (Morris, *PNTC Romans*).

But Paul gives two other reasons in verses 3-4 why God has established government. The first, verse 3, is that government is intended to be a deterrent to bad conduct.

Obviously, God knows the propensities of fallen humanity. Without laws and rules and recognized authorities to enforce those laws and rules, civilization degenerates into anarchy and savagery—everyone doing what is right in his own eyes. The thesis of William Golding’s famous book, *Lord of the Flies*, is that when left to its own devices and given the opportunity, human nature will revert back to the inherent savagery that lies within everyone. That theme originated from the Bible, and the theological term for it is *depravity*. And so, to provide a check for bad behavior God instituted government.

Government is supposed to strike fear in the hearts of wrongdoers. Paul literally says, *“rulers are a terror to bad conduct.”* The God-ordained deterrent to bad conduct is the fear of punishment from governing authorities. In verse 4 Paul underscores this by saying that if someone does wrong he *should* be afraid, for authorities do not bear the sword in vain. Weapons, when used properly, are a God sanctioned deterrent to wrongdoing.

None of us likes the feeling of being afraid, and none of us wants to live in fear. So, Paul asks a question with an obvious answer. *“Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive His approval...”*

In normal times and in ordinary circumstances law abiding citizens have nothing to be afraid of because they are not doing anything that disrupts order or disturbs the peace. Only wrongdoers are targeted for punishment by authorities, at least that is God’s intention. Of course, that is not how it always works, as in the George Floyd case, and so, later, we will talk about an appropriate response if government abuses its authority. It is important to remember that Paul is presenting the norm and is not covering every eventuality in these instructions.

But before we talk about the exceptions, I’d like to look at verse 4 where Paul gives yet another reason why God established government. **Verse 4,** *“for [the ruler] 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.”*

If someone breaks the law, there is a legitimate reason to be afraid. Lawbreakers or wrongdoers arouse God’s wrath, and He intends to punish them for it. That is called justice. And the way God executes justice is through governing authorities. They are God’s *avengers* who carry out His wrath on wrongdoers. This is a manner in which government does God’s will and act as His servants. They maintain order and execute justice on His behalf.

That is important to remember. Since government works for God we must stay on government's good side. Look at **verse 5**. *⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*

This statement concludes and summarizes what Paul has been saying up to now. Because the authority is God's servant and exists to punish wrongdoing, the Christian must *submit*. Submitting simply to avoid punishment is itself a valid reason, especially when we consider that the punishment inflicted by civil authorities is an expression of God's wrath. But there is another reason. Paul adds *but also for the sake of conscience*.

Christians obey the authorities because it is right. Violating the law or disobeying a reasonable directive from the government *ought* to violate our conscience, which produces guilt. And guilt, in this case, even though it is uncomfortable, is a *good* thing. It is our God-given warning system to let us know that we have done something wrong. So, if you want to have a clear conscience and live without guilt, submit to the government.

We have now covered the most salient features in Romans 13, the New Testament's most detailed instruction about government and how we are to relate to it. But I hasten to add that it is *not* exhaustive—it is not everything we need to know about our relationship to government. The Bible reveals some other factors that must, at times, be taken into consideration, simply because government is not *always* God's servant or on God's side. Sometimes government is God's adversary, in which case we may have an obligation to resist or disobey it.

Paul's instruction in Romans 13 presumes that the governing authorities, as God's servants, are acting honorably and justly. We all know there are times when governing authorities do *not* act honorably and justly. They may mandate or prohibit that we do something which violates our biblical convictions or contradicts what God says in his Word. In such cases we have a duty to disobey the governing authorities, because our allegiance to God trumps our allegiance to the state.

A few weeks ago, when I was talking about our dual citizenship (we are both U.S. citizens and heavenly citizens), I said that when there is a clash between the values, principles, and obligations of those two citizenships, our heavenly citizenship always trumps our earthly citizenship.

The classic example of this in the Old Testament is when Darius, king of Babylon, was tricked into signing a decree that anyone in the kingdom who prayed to someone other than Darius himself was to be thrown into the lions' den. And Daniel, fully aware of the king's decree, went to his room, opened his window toward Jerusalem, and continued his practice of praying to Yahweh three times a day (Dan. 6:10). He was arrested, much to the king's chagrin (because he loved and trusted Daniel). But God dramatically and emphatically delivered Daniel from the lions' den and restored him to even greater honor.

The classic example of this in the New Testament is in Acts 5 when Peter and John were commanded by the Jewish ruling council not to speak any more in Jesus' name. And Peter famously replied, "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29).

A few years later there was another well documented clash between God and the State. Caesar, the Roman emperor, demanded that every subject in the Empire bend their knee and confess him as lord. Caesar, as a polytheist, was not being exclusive. He did not mind if a person bowed the knee to Apollo or Jupiter or Artemis or Jesus, just as long as he also bowed the knee to him.

Of course, Christians believe that there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, so they would not bow the knee to Caesar nor confess him as lord, and many of them lost their lives as a result.

All of these are biblical examples of where to draw the line when it comes to submitting or not submitting to governing authorities. Is there a common thread in all of them? Yes, the common thread is that the government asked them to do something that God expressly forbid, or not do something that God had clearly told them to do. Did God command His people to pray to Him in Daniel's day? Yes! Did Jesus tell Peter and the Apostles to proclaim the good news about Jesus? Yes! Did Jesus declare that He alone was Lord, and forbid that we divide our allegiance between Him and another so-called lord? Yes!

So how would this apply in our day and age? Where do we draw the line between obeying and disobeying government? Please listen carefully. *We draw the line based on biblical convictions, or from what God has clearly stated in His word.* Whether we should obey or not obey the government is *not* a subjective interpretation. It is *not* based on what whether we like or don't like what they tell us to do, or what we *feel* is right or wrong. There must be an objective basis for where we draw the line—and that basis is God's word.

You all know that a few years ago the Supreme Court ruled that gay marriage is legal. I, as a pastor, have legal authority to officiate at weddings. But if it became a law that any person who officiates at weddings *must* accommodate gay or lesbian couples if they asked me to marry them, I would refuse and suffer the consequences. Not because I'm a homophobe; not because I don't like or love the gay couple; but because it violates the clear teaching of Scripture that marriage is a one-flesh union between a man and a woman.

If the State declared that it was illegal to preach that homosexuality is wrong or is a sin, I would disobey the State and suffer the consequences, not because I hate homosexuals, but because it is clearly stated in God's Word that homosexuality *is* a sin, and as a preacher of God's Word, I have been mandated to preach the whole counsel of God.

If I was mandated by the State to report parents in our church who spank their children as a form of discipline, I would refuse, because God tells us in his Word that the rod of correction is a legitimate and effective form of discipline, and it tells parents to use it. I'm not talking about abuse; I'm not talking about beating a child until he's black and blue. I'm talking about a loving demonstration of corporal punishment.

I know people who live in Mu\$lim countries where it is against the law to proselytize or to evangelize, and yet they do it regularly, at the risk of going to jail or being kicked out of the country, because Jesus said, *"Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation"* (Mark 16:15), and they must obey God rather than men.

In 2018, China instituted what it calls *New Regulations on Religious Affairs*, which bans any unauthorized religious teachings. These new regulations primarily target China's booming Protestant church which numbers 116 million people. Many pastors are in jail for refusing to allow the State to determine what they can teach, because they have been mandated by God to preach the whole Bible, not what the government says they can preach.

I could give you dozens of other illustrations. But, once again, all of them have a common thread. The reasons for not submitting are because these government mandates or prohibitions violate biblical convictions or express commands found in Scripture.

By the way, it is not difficult to know where to draw the line if you know Scripture well. If you don't know Scripture well, please be careful, because you can easily default to your personal convictions, rather than biblical convictions, and there is a difference. We all have preferences and convictions based on our upbringing, our political views, our biases, and our experiences. That's okay, but you cannot determine, based on your personal conviction, to disobey the government. God forbids you to do that in Romans 13, and if you do, you will incur His judgment.

So, how does this relate to what is going on in America today? As I said earlier, government is making the headlines because of all the crises we are experiencing. And we have seen both appropriate and inappropriate responses to government by citizens of America. But how does God want Christians to respond? I assure you He has an opinion. So, we had better have a reasoned response that is based on sound theological reflection, that is, taking into consideration the Scriptural data that might address those issues.

I'd like to do that together for the next few minutes and then next week. I'd like to explore some of the current events in our nation related to government, evaluate some of the responses we have either had ourselves or seen others have, and see how those responses correspond with biblical mandates and biblical convictions.

Let's start with our government's leadership in the Coronavirus crisis and some of their specific mandates. Don't forget, all mandates are to be taken seriously and considered carefully, and, according to Romans 13, we are to submit to all mandates unless they violate our biblical convictions or contradict what God says in His Word.

Let's start with the governor's current mandate to wear face coverings in businesses and churches? Is that something we should submit to? I'm not asking if you think it's reasonable, or if it has been proven to be beneficial. I'm asking if this particular mandate violates a biblical conviction, or if it contradicts what God has said in His word. I cannot find anything in Scripture about whether we should or should not wear face coverings. Nor is wearing face coverings a moral or ethical issue that you can infer from Scripture. So, wearing a face covering or not cannot be a biblical conviction. It may be a political conviction, it might be a personal preference, but those are not reasons to exempt you from obeying the governor.

Let's move on. What about the governor's mandate to not allow churches to meet in their normal way for the first four months of the pandemic? We were encouraged to isolate in our homes except to go to the grocery store and pharmacy, and we were limited to gathering in groups of no more than ten people. Some Christians were upset about this, because they felt the government was restricting religious freedom, or they felt church leaders who followed this mandate were sheepishly acquiescing to the government.

But let's try to look at this issue objectively from a Scriptural perspective. Does the mandate to not meet in a church building during a pandemic violate a biblical conviction or contradict something God says in his Word? Most Christians have a biblical conviction that meeting together as a church at least weekly is God's intention. There is a passage in Hebrews where we are given the admonition to *"...consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" (10:24-25).*

So, was obeying the governor's mandate a violation of a biblical conviction or disobedience to the clear teaching of Scripture? As elders we wrestled with this, and there were two things that guided our decision. First, the governor's mandate was for the purpose of protecting the health of Oregonians. That is one of her God-given mandates—to serve and protect. And so, the governor closed all venues where people gather, including restaurants and retail stores, even though it caused great economic distress. If churches were the only gathering that the governor prohibited, it would have been a different story.

Second, as elders felt that EBC could still "stir one another up to love and good works" through smaller gatherings in homes, and through our virtual services online. And we worked hard to try to encourage one another through these means. Had we been forbidden to do that, it would have been a different story. The command in Hebrews is to stir one another up to love and good deeds. That happened with most people in our church.

Were we neglecting to meet together? I don't think so. There is nothing in Scripture that says churches are supposed to meet all together in a designated building. Modern day church buildings are useful, but they are not necessary for a church to exist or a church to do what it is supposed to do. Many churches throughout history and even today have met in homes or outdoors.

Okay, we are just getting started with our attempt to evaluate how God would have us respond to government during the current crises in America. Next week, Lord willing, we are going to talk about some of the other crises in our nation. We are going to talk about what God thinks about Christians' protesting and being involved in the political and legislative processes in government. And I want you to be assured, I have no interest in sharing or promoting my opinions with you. We want to see what Scripture says.

Government is God's Servant Romans 13:3-5

Main Idea: We are to submit to governing authorities because God put those authorities in place to deter bad conduct and execute justice

The Command to Submit to Governing Authorities (1a)

The Reason for Submission (1b-2)

The Reason for Government (3-4)
To deter bad conduct (3)

To execute justice for the wrongdoer (4)

The Incentive for Submitting to Authority (5)
To avoid God's wrath (5a)

To keep a clear conscience (5b)

When God's Will and Government Clash
Biblical examples of resistance

Occasions when resistance is necessary
When a mandate or prohibition violates our
biblical convictions

When a mandate or prohibition contradicts
what God has clearly stated in His Word

How to discern when there is a real clash