

May 25/26, 2002

Memorial Day Weekend
“Ministers of God”
Romans 13:1-7
Pastor Bryan Clark

We are all aware of the fact that people have lots of opinions when it comes to government, the military or law enforcement. Whenever we talk about politics, there's no shortage of opinions. But sometimes in those discussions (as a matter of fact, most of the time in those discussions), the one opinion that's missing is God's opinion. What does God have to say about government and the role of government? And what is our response to be, as the people of God, to those who govern us?

The most thorough discussion of that is found in Romans chapter 13, and it seems fitting on this Memorial Day weekend that we talk about this. In Romans, Paul has taken the first 11 chapters to basically explain the message of the Gospel—to go through a very tedious case to demonstrate that we are sinners in need of a Savior, that Jesus came and died on the cross for our sins, and that we are saved by His grace through faith. Having concluded that through chapter 11, beginning in chapter 12 he starts to talk about how that is then fleshed out in life. What does it mean for a redeemed person to live day by day? What does it mean for us as the children of God to live out our faith in practical ways?

This then leads to the discussion in chapter 13. It begins: “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” Verse 1 establishes the foundational principle: and that is that God is in charge. God is a sovereign God. God has all authority. But as the God of authority, He has delegated authority to governing bodies that rule over us.

Look at the last part of verse 1, when he says these are “established by God.” It could be translated “appointed by God.” It's a very interesting Greek word. It's a word that Paul used to describe the fact that he was appointed or established by God to be an apostle. So he uses this same word to say, “Just as I was established or appointed to be an apostle, so these governing officials are appointed or called or established by God to carry out God's authority on earth.”

Verse 2: “Therefore [*in other words, in light of God's authority and His delegated authority*] he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.” In other words, he is saying that because this governing authority is delegated from God, the government represents God's authority on earth. Therefore when we are rebellious against that authority, we're rebelling against God and we will suffer the consequences of that.

Now we understand he's talking about the ideal. But, of course, no government is ideal. In this case, in the first century the Roman government was very corrupt and very intolerant of the Christian faith. Yet there is an understanding that even a poor government is better than no government—because God understands that we are sinners at the core, and left to ourselves we will devour one another.

There was a time period in the nation of Israel that was described by the phrase, “And every person did that which was right in his/her own eyes.” And it was the lowest point in the nation's history. Left to ourselves it becomes the law of the jungle. So even a poor government is better than no government.

We also understand that we're not supposed to just be led as sheep to the slaughter; but rather, our ultimate allegiance is to God; and God has delegated authority to governing bodies. But any time that governing body asks me to do something that's contrary to God's law, then God's authority trumps the authority of man.

Now there are nations where that's a factor on a daily basis. If you're a Christian and you live in China, you're not allowed to share your faith. But God says that is your mission in life. Therefore their responsibility to God trumps the authority of the government, and they do what God has called them to do.

During World War II it should have been the responsibility of the church to rise up against what Hitler was doing. Sadly to say, for the most part the church just went with the flow and was a non-factor. But certainly that would have been a time when the church would have been very justified to have stood against the governing authorities.

We would have to say here in the United States of America, the number of occasions where our government requires us to do something that is contrary to God's law is extremely rare. We pretty much have total freedom to fulfill the mission of the church, to proclaim the Gospel, to live our lives exactly the way God says we should live. So, by and large, we are instructed to be in submission to God's delegated authority over us.

But still, what is the role of government? We understand that our government is involved in all kinds of things. Politicians argue about what they should and shouldn't be involved in, and we as citizens can get into that argument. That has to be settled somewhere else besides here.

As far as God is concerned, what does He say the role of government is to be? He tells us that in verses 3 and 4: "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil." If you want to boil the role of government down to the simplest terms, it would be that God has delegated this authority to government in order to protect good and to punish evil. When it's all said and done, that is the role of government—to protect or reward good and to punish evil.

It's interesting in this text that Paul uses the word "minister." He uses it twice in verse 4—that government and government people are ministers of God. So God has delegated His authority to governing bodies, and those people are God's ministers to carry out His authority on earth. It's the Greek word "diakonos," which is the word from which we get our English word "deacon." Have you ever thought about governing officials as God's deacons? That's what they are according to Romans 13:4. The word "deacon" simply means to be a servant. They are God's servants.

So the role of government is to serve the people. Now, too often this gets turned upside down and we end up as the citizens serving the government, which is backwards. The role of the government is to serve the people; and they do that by rewarding good and punishing evil.

A lot of law enforcement agencies have as their motto: "to protect and serve." That's actually a very biblical statement. As a matter of fact, that hits the nail on the head. That's exactly what their role is as defined by God: to protect and to serve. You might be more likely

to think of me as a minister than the police officer who pulls you over. But according to God, he is a minister. He is there with delegated authority from God to serve you. And sometimes serving means protecting and keeping the laws.

Paul mentions in verse 4 that is done by bearing the sword. That wasn't a cliché in the first century. They literally had to bear a sword. They were a military army and their weapon of choice was a sword. We would use the same language today, only we would say “to bear arms.” There is an understanding that in order for the government to fulfill its delegated authority, there is a need to bear the sword in order to enforce protecting good and punishing evil.

Now there has been a debate for generations over this whole idea of Christians in the military and Christians in law enforcement. It comes under the discussion related to being a conscientious objector. We need to understand there are very godly people who hold that position, believing in their conscience before God that they, as a Christian, cannot be involved in the military or in law enforcement. And we need to respect that.

But I would like to point out in this text why I would disagree with that position. Primarily that position is enforced through the Sermon on the Mount—that we are to turn the other cheek; that if our enemy does something to us we are to return that with love; and if our enemy asks us to carry something one mile we carry it two. It's the whole idea that we love those who persecute us—which is right; it's true. That's what the Sermon on the Mount is all about.

But I want you to look back at Romans chapter 12, which means going from Romans 13 and scooting our way backwards to verse 9 of chapter 12. We need to understand the flow of thought here, because this section beginning with Romans 12:9 sounds very familiar. As a matter of fact, it sounds very much like the Sermon on the Mount.

Romans 12:9-21:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take out your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY, SAYS THE LORD. BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Some of those statements come right out of the Sermon on the Mount. And what it says is that as an individual (as a person, as a neighbor) it is not my responsibility to return evil for evil. It's not my responsibility to take the law into my own hands. If my neighbors mistreat me, then I'm to love them in return. If they hit me on one cheek, I'll give them the other. If they mistreat me in some way, it's not my job to get even. That's up to God; and I'm to love them in return. That's how God says we are to live. That's what He says in the Sermon on the Mount; that's what He says in Romans 12.

But as soon as he says God is the avenger, the very next discussion is the role of government as God's agent, as God's ministers on earth, in order to carry out that vengeance—to carry out God's responsibility on earth. Therefore the flow of thought is to say, “This is how I want you to live as an individual. But also understand, as God, I've delegated My authority to governing agencies and they don't bear the sword for nothing. They're My ministers, and they do My work on earth in order to reward good and punish evil.”

Therefore in light of that, I see nothing inconsistent with the believer being involved in that responsibility as a governing official, as a minister of God. As a matter of fact, there are lots of people who function in their personal life as a neighbor (or a friend) who are to return evil with love and turn the other cheek. But they also function in a God-assigned role of delegated authority to protect good and punish evil. You have lots of examples of godly people in the Scriptures who served in pagan governments. You have Joseph, Daniel, Esther, Mordecai, Nehemiah...there's a long list. It seems to me to be a tragic thing if the people of God do not function in roles as ministers of God in order to carry out God's delegated authority on earth. Therefore we believe that is a role God does call some believers to fulfill.

In verses 5-6, he goes beyond just the fear of punishment, though, and says to us as believers, as the children of God, “Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” It sounds very much like Jesus in the Gospels when He said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's”—honor to whom honor, respect to whom respect.

But in verse 5 he says we don't do this just because we're fearful of being punished if we get caught. We do what's right for conscience' sake: we do what's right because it's right, because it's the law. That should distinguish us as the people of God: we simply do right for the principle reason that it's right.

Whether you're talking about paying your taxes, laws out in your vocation in the marketplace, or speed limits, there are laws in place in order to protect us. People who violate those need to be punished, and we as God's people ought to be law-abiding model citizens.

Let me give you an example of a way that fleshes out here at the church. We have a secretary in the office whose primary, almost sole responsibility, is to deal with copyright laws. This person devotes herself to making sure we are complying with the laws as they relate to copyright. Some churches may just blow that off and say those laws are stupid...and they don't even try. I personally don't think we have that right. There is nothing in that law that asks us to violate any law of God. Whether we agree with it or disagree with it isn't really our option. Our option is to abide by the law. So we do invest a lot of time, energy, and money into making sure we are legal. When we have certain events here, sometimes people complain because we don't set up enough chairs. But there are fire codes that are set according to the law. And we are expected to abide by the law; therefore we work very hard to be in compliance with what the law says.

Now we do have mechanisms and ways to change laws and to protest laws and to reelect people. But unless there is a law requiring you to do something that God forbids, we are required to be obedient to the law for conscience' sake. We can't just blow that off and say, “I don't agree with that.” Therefore we as believers are to be the model citizens.

It's also important to remember (I didn't make this distinction before when we were talking about the government and military and law enforcement) that in the first century there was no distinction between law enforcement and military. It was just the military. They dealt with issues of law that were domestic, and they dealt with issues of law that were on foreign soil. That was simply the governing body. So the Bible makes no distinction between law enforcement and military. They're all on the same page. They're all ministers of God. They all fulfill basically the same responsibility.

We understand that our government is not perfect. As a matter of fact, there is always some sort of a crisis or something going on that can frustrate and upset us. But we would also have to admit that we have a very, very good life here in America. As a matter of fact, the majority of people in the world can't even dream about living the way we live on a daily basis. And it's important to remember the reason is because God has established governing ministers who reward good, punish evil, and create an environment where we have the freedom to fulfill God's mission. We have the freedom to experience a lifestyle that most of the world doesn't even begin to enter into.

We also need to remember that, according to President Bush this last week, over a million men and women have died to allow us to be able to live the way we live. What we have has not come cheaply. As a matter of fact, there are people who put their lives on the line every day so that we can live our life the way we do. The Bible says these people are to be honored and respected, because they are God's ministers to carry out His authority here on earth.

Several years ago I was at a high school basketball game and it was time for the National Anthem, so everybody stood. There was an elderly gentleman right down below me, and I knew for a fact that he had served in World War II. And then down below him there was a group of students. As they began to play the National Anthem, of course he came to attention and he put his hand over his heart. But below him these students were just oblivious to what was going on. They were laughing and wrestling and making some rude comments about the flag and the National Anthem. It caught my attention as I saw this guy begin to cry. You understood exactly what was going through his mind. He had seen his fellow soldiers die to provide these young people the lifestyle they now live. But they had no sense of that; they had no respect. It was a non-issue to them. But he realized the price that had been paid so they could live the life they live today.

We as the people of God are to honor those to whom honor is due. We are to be model citizens as a testimony of the presence of Christ in our lives. And that is a big part of what Memorial Day weekend is all about.