

Sermon — 07/03/22

Text — Romans 13:1-4

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants — agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Theme — “Be Subject”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This coming Monday we celebrate our nation's Independence Day holiday. There will be all sorts of symbols and shows of patriotism. Parades. Fireworks. Speeches. Red/white/blue everywhere. Lots of talk about our republic's system of government and how it works (or doesn't work). Politicians and TV talking heads bloviating on and on about “the American experiment”. Just as everyone claims to be Irish on St. Patrick's Day, so everyone claims to love the USA on the Fourth of July. So, this seemed like a good opportunity for us to take a look at the **Bible's** teaching on government. On how we ought to view it. On how we are to behave towards it. On how government teaches and shows us God at work. (pause)

So, what DOES the Bible say about government? Well, St. Paul has just told us in our text that ALL governing authorities have been established by God. All of them. Think about

that for a second. ALL governing authorities. Even the wicked ones. Even the corrupt ones. Even the inefficient and wasteful ones. God put King Herod on the throne, just as He had placed David there. Pontius Pilate had his authority from the Lord, no less than did Joseph in Egypt. Whether elected or appointed or inherited, all rulers have their commission from God. Whether a democracy or a constitutional republic or a dictatorship or a monarchy, all forms of government are to serve the Lord and His purposes. And they will have to answer to God for how they carry out their offices and duties. Not to you and me. But to God.

Now, to the powerful and mighty — like the Roman emperor Nero, who was ruling when St. Paul wrote these words — to such people, the idea that there is One greater than they is often hard to accept. Rulers down through history have been notoriously vain, proud, self-important people. People used to GIVING orders, rather than following them. People who are served rather than who serve others. And so, while it might seem that Paul's words here elevate rulers, the truth is that they actually do the opposite. That is, Paul is saying that no one — not even the Caesars and other rulers who imagined themselves to be gods — no one is above the Lord. Even *they* serve God — and they serve at the Lord's pleasure. I doubt old Nero would have liked to hear THAT!

But it is true. God arranges and works and uses EVERYTHING for His good and gracious purposes. In the Old Testament we see God using the greatest empires in ancient history — Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Greeks under Alexander — and all to accomplish His will. The same with great Rome in the New Testament. And it is so today as well. One might think that Joe Biden sits in the Oval Office because he won an election. Or that Putin rules Russia because he was able to manipulate their system, allowing him to ascend to power.

Or that Queen Elizabeth sits on the throne of Great Britain because she was next in line. But the fact of the matter is that all of them — and, as Paul says, all rulers — are in those places solely because God has put them there. Simply put, they are His servants.

Servants. That means government and its personnel exist to serve God. To do His will and bidding. So, the natural and obvious question would be: what is that will? That is, what does God want and expect government to do? St. Paul sums it up quite succinctly: government exists for our good. To support the beneficial and healthy, to punish and oppose that which is harmful. Now, how THAT works out is limitless. Government is to provide stability and order. To protect the weak. To promote the general welfare. To defend its citizens. To provide the necessary framework and world in which the Gospel may advance and grow. Government, though, is NOT there to benefit rulers or bureaucrats or politicians. It does not exist for its own sake. It is not to make arbitrary rules and laws. It is not to oppress its people, or encourage sin, or encroach on other nations/peoples, or obstruct the preaching of Christ. And where government commands us to sin, there we must say “no”. (pause)

The next thing for our consideration today is: how are we Christians to view government? And the answer is quite simple. St. Paul tells us that we are to see government and its officials as servants of God. Not as objects of our ridicule and hatred. Not as our lords and masters. Not as the architects and arbiters of right and wrong. But as God’s servants. That means that HE is in control. HE calls the shots. HE decides what is right and wrong. And, as God’s servants, we are to see God at work through them.

Sometimes that is easier to do than at other times. When government is friendly to us, when it seems to support us, when it more-or-less adheres to God’s natural law — at such times,

it is easier for us to see government as His agents and servants. A King David clearly is serving the Lord. A George Washington obviously seeks to do what God orders and desires. And so, it is easier then for us to see the wisdom of Paul's words. But what about when government is NOT? What about when government is less helpful, less vigilant, less protective? What about when government is even evil? How do we see God at work in Roman persecution of Christians (as happened under the very Nero who ruled when Paul wrote these words)? Or the evils of Nazi Germany, or Stalinist Russia, or today's Iran or North Korea? What about when OUR government decides that abortion is fine, that homosexual marriage is proper, that certain groups get a "pass" (and other groups do not) under the law? What if the taxes (which Paul tells us we are to pay!) are unfair, or are used for nefarious or wicked purposes?

Well, they still are God's servants. Perhaps not good and faithful servants. But, since they are HIS servants, it is up to the Lord to judge them. To discipline or remove them. Now, in some cases — such as in our American system of government — there may be ways to express our displeasure, or to seek changes to their policies and actions, or even to call them to repentance. But we must still see them as God's servants and agents. And we must remember that HE is in control — and that He will hold them responsible in His own time and way. (pause)

And that leads to the practical, where-the-rubber-hits-the-road question: how are we Christians to relate to government? How do we behave towards it? St. Paul sums that up for in two words: "*be subject*". Now, to be honest, our human nature does not like that kind of talk. It does not like submitting — being subject — to others. No, it wants to be free. To rule. To do what IT wants. Being subject, though, means recognizing a higher power and authority than

self. And that rubs our sinful nature the wrong way. Just as rulers like to imagine themselves to be in control and in charge, so too do we.

And so we need to hear Paul — we need to hear **God** — call us to repentance. Honestly, how many of us have NOT failed to treat government as God's agent? How many of us want to make it into OUR servant instead? How many of us have made jokes about government and authorities? How many of us resented — or even disobeyed — laws we deemed unnecessary or inconvenient? How many of us gladly, cheerfully pay our taxes? You know the answer as well as I do. Because, like rulers, we do not want to *'be subject'*.

But we are. We are subject to God. He is the Almighty. Not you, not me, not President Biden or any ruler. The Lord. He alone truly rules. All things. Heaven AND earth. Even Satan is subject to Him. Oh, we may fight against God — and we often do. But it is a losing battle. And eventually everyone — from the highest king to the lowest peasant — we will all be forced to submit. To admit that He is God, not us. And the sooner we come to that realization, the better.

So, what does that mean for our behavior towards government? Well, remember the Fourth Commandment — and remember that it applies to ALL those God has placed in authority over us. Parents. Employers and bosses. And government. We are to see God at work in/through them. And we are to accord them the respect due as servants of God. Even when they fail. For the truth of the matter is that ALL authorities fail, don't they? You parents know you have failed. Bosses too fail. And so we should not be surprised when those in government also fail. Not that we excuse it or ignore it. But we need to be realistic and understand that no ruler, no government, no official is perfect. We ALL need forgiveness.

And so, in his letter to Timothy, this same St. Paul tells us to pray for those in authority over us. That they may be good and faithful servants of the Lord. And, where they fail, that they may see their error and repent, and properly fulfill the high offices to which the Lord has called them. We are to support and encourage them. To be respectful towards them. To be good and honest citizens. To pay our taxes, to serve as we might, to follow any and all laws that do not contradict God's Law. To teach our children to see God at work in authorities and rulers. That is indeed hard work because, as I said, it goes against our sinful human nature. But such is the life of a Christian. (pause)

- And so we come to our last question for the day: how does government show us God at work? After all, if government is supposed to be acting in God's stead and at His command, then it ought to demonstrate/show God. And that brings us to Christ, the King of Kings. God in the flesh. The One who perfectly shows God's love. Of course, we know how HE showed that love. How HE ruled. He did so at the cross. The King taking the punishment that ought to be His subjects'. The Ruler of all lowering Himself to be the Servant of all. The One who is to be obeyed is the One who is obeying/fulfilling the Law for us. So, how DOES government show us God?

Well, obviously, government is NOT our savior. It is made up of sinful people who, even when they try their best, fall short. But government IS the means that God uses to protect and defend, to reward good and punish evil, to give order and peace and stability. Imagine how horrible this world and life would be without government! Even "bad" government, to SOME extent, provides these things. And, as far as they do, we should thank and praise God for that.

We should honor and respect and obey government for being God's agents and means in giving us this great and necessary blessing.

And where government fails, it gives us the opportunity come to our Heavenly Father and ask His help. In changing our leaders' hearts and their policies. In using us to step in and assist our neighbor. In teaching us to learn to trust Him, and Him alone, for our earthly blessings.
(pause)

As we celebrate Independence Day this year, we thank our Lord for all the good He does through government. We also ask Him to help it to do better. And in the meantime, we do as St. Paul said in our text: we are subject to those whom God has placed in those offices. Because He IS in control. And He works all things for the good of those who love Him. In our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Wed — Nicene Creed
OS — Nicene Creed
FE — Offertory/Prayers