

3. Christians, Holyrood and Westminster

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[0 : 00] Let us bow our heads together and I'll lead us in prayer to the God who is greatly, deeply faithful to us.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much that you have shown faithfulness to your people far before we could ever show faithfulness to you in return.

And you have been faithful to your promises. We acknowledge with joy that it is you who made us and therefore we belong to you.

And also that it is you who have redeemed us and therefore we belong to you doubly. By virtue of our creation and the rescue that you have mounted for us by sending Jesus.

And we thank you, dear Father, that even though Adam and Eve, our first forefathers, rebelled against you. And even though rightly and righteously you had to place your curse and ban upon the human race.

[1 : 08] You have kept faith with us. And even in that dreadful moment in the Garden of Eden, you promised the human race that the one would come eventually who would crush the serpent and his power.

And over the many centuries, dear Father, you have proved yourself faithful to that promise. You stood with your people, the people of Israel.

You continue to extend your covenant to them and your promised blessings throughout all their centuries. And even when they rebelled against you and lost their faith and were disobedient.

And even though you had to drive some of them away, yet you kept faith with Israel. And you kept a remnant for yourself. And then finally, finally, your own son came saying, I am the true vine, the real Israel.

And you have shown, dear Father, that through Jesus and through the opening up of the gospel about him to people of all nations and tribes and tongues, you have kept faith with the human race.

[2 : 18] And you have made available to all of us the great salvation which has its ultimate goal in your wonderful presence in heaven.

Thank you that we can trust you, dear Father. And you know that our own personal lives have both joys and sorrows.

There are challenges that are with all of us. And we thank you so much that we can trust you to be faithful to us, even in the midst of our most difficult tests and challenges.

Thank you for your blessings to us, even today. Thank you for bringing us through the night, for refreshing us, for providing us with Christian fellowship and the opportunity in a place like this to hear your words.

So we pray, dear Father, that you will bless us today. And as your word now is read and opened up, we pray that it will be a joy to us and that you will give us understanding and an ever-growing desire to love you and to serve you.

[3 : 23] And we ask it through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn to Romans chapter 13. And if you've got one of our big hardback Bibles, you'll find this on page 948.

Romans chapter 13. And I want to read the first seven verses only of this chapter.

And they're just a little bit out of the ordinary as far as Paul's regular subjects of teaching are concerned. I think you could perhaps call this a unique passage in Paul's writing.

So Romans chapter 13, verses 1 to 7. 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.

[4 : 33] 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 the same reason, you also pay taxes. For the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them.

Taxes to whom taxes are owed. Revenue to whom revenue is owed. Respect to whom respect is owed. Honor to whom honor is owed.

[5 : 34] Amen. May the Lord bless these words to us and our understanding and our hearts. Well, now we're continuing today in our little series in the epistle to the Romans.

And our starting point, and some of you, if you were here a fortnight ago, you'll remember this. We were starting at chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. And you might just like to flick back over the page to chapter 12, verses 1 and 2.

These verses have been described as the fountainhead of all Christian living. Or if you like, the fountainhead of all Christian ethical behavior. And I think I'll read these again.

Because they give shape and direction to the next three or four chapters. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

Holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

[6 : 33] That by testing, you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. So what Paul is saying here to those who are Christians is that once we are Christians, it's going to affect us profoundly both in body and mind.

So in verse 1, we're to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice for him to use. In whatever way he wants to. And we're to have our minds transformed so that we can learn God's will.

Now that, of course, is not instant. It's a lifetime's process, learning God's will. But developing and maturing as a Christian will always involve the progressive transformation of our thinking.

Now, last week, we looked at the next little paragraph, verses 3 to 8 in chapter 12, where Paul teaches the Roman Christians and us how to work together as a body with varying gifts and abilities.

This week, I want to move straight into chapter 13, verses 1 to 7. It's not that the second half of chapter 12 is unimportant. On the contrary, it's a very wonderful passage about how to relate to other people in the best and most loving way.

[7 : 41] But I'm moving on to this first half of chapter 13 because it's the kind of section which is rather unfamiliar to Christians. And I know that some Christians find it difficult, don't quite know what to make of it.

For some Christians, it's rather foreign territory. And it takes us into a place where Paul rarely takes his readers. And that is to Holyrood and Westminster, if I can put it like that.

It's about how Christians relate to the government and to national legislation. Now, we might think, does the Bible really have to deal with a subject like that?

But don't politics and religion, or politics and salvation, don't they occupy very different spheres? Well, let me try to set these seven verses in their wider context in the Bible, because I think that will help us to see why the subject that Paul is dealing with is so important.

God is introduced to us at the beginning as not only the creator of the world, but the governor of the world. He made the world, and in making it, he imposed good order upon the primeval chaos.

[8 : 49] So, for example, he set limits on the oceans and the land masses. He designed night and day. He designed the seasons of the year and the movement of the tides and everything else in what we might call nature, but really is part of creation.

God has made it all and governs it. And when he created the human race, male and female, he made us in his own image, meaning that we should be as he is and should act as he acts.

Now, we reflect his image in many different ways, but one of those ways is that under his authority, we are commissioned to govern the earth as he governs the universe.

So, capacity for government and the authority to govern is part of the nature of God, which he has passed on and shared with us who are made in his image.

So, to govern, to organize, and to impose order is part of what it means to be human. And we all do this all the time. Think, for example, of your kitchen at home.

[9 : 51] After a meal is over, Have I been lost? Am I found? Good. After a meal is over, you look around the kitchen and it's full of dirty pots and pans. Oh, you think, dear me, I've got to sort it out.

So, you do. You clean the plates and pots and you straighten them out and put them all away. You do the same thing in your garden. If you have a garden, at this time of the year, the grass grows and you stop it becoming a shaggy wilderness by getting out your lawnmower and cutting it.

If you raise a family, you have to organize and discipline your children. If you keep a dog, you have to say to it, Thus far and no further, Rover, do you go.

We have to impose order even upon our dogs. Now, national government, which involves formulating laws and then, of course, enforcing those laws, that's part of the need for order and organization which God has written into our DNA.

We know that a nation without government, a nation without law and order, is a nation falling apart. So, when we hear sometimes, as we do, of a nation described as a failed state, what is meant is that law and order has broken down and the government is not strong enough to restore good order.

[11 : 02] And the consequence for that nation's people is misery and insecurity. Now, all this and much more lies behind Paul's thinking as he begins Romans chapter 13.

And really, the opening verse of the chapter sums up the teaching of the whole passage from verse 1 to verse 7. So, let me read verse 1 again. 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.

Now, Paul is writing to Christians here, and these seven verses are a subsection of chapter 12, verses 1 and 2.

So, to live according to the teaching of Romans 13, 1 to 7 is part of what it means to have our minds transformed and our thinking renewed. So, Paul is teaching the Christians at Rome that the authority of God over their lives is going to be expressed through two different channels or conduits.

God is, if you like, at the top of both, but it comes to us through two channels. So, first of all, Christian people are to live under the authority of Christ, who is the head of the church, and Paul writes about that elsewhere.

[12 : 20] But also, Christians are to live under the authority of the national government, because both Christ and the national government express the authority of God in different ways.

Now, Jesus taught exactly the same kind of thing. Do you remember that discussion that he had with various people about paying taxes? Somebody came to him and said, should we pay taxes? It was a trick question.

But he said, show me a coin. And having a coin in his hand and noticing the inscription on it, he said, whose image is this?

Whose inscription? And somebody said, Caesar's. Well then, said Jesus, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, because he has a proper sphere of authority. And give to God what is God's.

In other words, Christian people are citizens of two kingdoms, and we owe allegiance to both. We're citizens of the kingdom of heaven, whose king is Jesus, and we follow him, and we gladly submit to him.

[13 : 20] But we're also citizens of an earthly kingdom, to which we have obligations. And that earthly kingdom, Paul is saying, ultimately derives its authority from God.

Now, my question is, why does Paul feel that he has to write this paragraph? Wouldn't the Roman Christians know that it was right to submit to the Roman government, and wrong to resist the laws of the Roman Empire?

Well, surely the Roman Christians needed to hear this for exactly the same reasons that you and I need to hear it. And that is, that there is a great deal about government legislation, which somehow, by nature, we don't very much like.

I mean, none of us, for example, enjoys paying our taxes, do we? Today is the 1st of August, and yesterday was the 31st of July. Now, if you're an income taxpayer, you know what that means, don't you?

You have to get your taxes in and paid to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs before the 31st of July. And if you were a person who sat down and wrote a check to HMRC, as you were writing your check last week, you were saying to yourself, I imagine, this is outrageous.

[14 : 32] I shouldn't have to pay as much as this. And yet, in our calmer and clearer moments, we all recognize that without taxes, the government couldn't provide health care and hospitals and schools and dustbin clearance and sewerage and road mending and a lot of other things that it does provide.

There have even been times when groups of Christians have wanted to drop out of society altogether and have no part in it. And you can understand this. A group of Christians get together and they say, let's buy a few beautiful acres on the Isle of Bute and we'll build some lovely accommodation there with our own hands.

And on our beautiful acres, we'll keep pigs and cows and chickens. We'll perhaps grow some wheat and barley and vegetables and fruit and we'll be self-sufficient and we will repel all invaders. And when the taxman comes to ask for our money, we'll tell him to take a running jump into the Atlantic.

Let us cut ourselves off. But Paul says here in verse 1, let every person be subject to the governing authorities. Now let's look a bit more carefully at the passage in front of us.

Paul's first point, I just want to make two points. Paul's first point is that government must be submitted to and therefore the law of the land must be submitted to because, as verse 1 puts it, government has been instituted by God.

[15 : 54] Now let me straight away address an obvious difficulty here. What if a country is ruled by an obviously wicked regime?

What if you'd been a citizen of Germany in the 1930s or 1940s when Hitler was in power? What if you'd been a Russian in Stalin's day? And you can think of contemporary regimes which are causing great grief and suffering today in different parts of the world.

Now I think the answer must be something like this. That Paul is teaching that the principle of national government is a God-given principle because God is a God of law and order and not a God of chaos and anarchy.

But a good provision given by God can be twisted and abused. Now this is equally true of something like marriage. We know that marriage is an excellent provision of God for the comfort and good order of the human race.

But it can be abused. A man can be violent towards his wife or a woman may cheat on her husband. But the fact that a good provision of God can be abused doesn't mean that the provision itself is faulty.

[17 : 07] There's nothing wrong with marriage. It's a wonderful institution. But sinful human beings can corrupt it and turn it into something awful. And government is just the same. The institution as a provision from God is a good thing.

It's given to us to look after the nation and to restrain evil. But sinful human beings can get their hands onto the machinery of government and then they can turn it into something awful and oppressive.

So although Paul doesn't actually say this in Romans 13, I think we have to allow for certain exceptions. And the Bible does allow for exceptions. So for example, there's a famous moment in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 5, when Peter and the other apostles have just begun to preach the gospel and they're hauled up before the Jewish authorities who charge them no longer to speak in the name of Christ.

And they go out and immediately start doing it again. And they get hauled up before the authorities again. And the authorities say, we've told you not to do this, why are you doing it? And Peter replies to the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews, we must obey God rather than men.

So I think we have to say that where national government or in that case, ecclesiastical authority are commanding Christians to do something which contravenes God's law, our allegiance, like Peter's, must be to God and not to men.

[18 : 33] And that's why in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, there were a number of very courageous Christians who opposed Hitler. And we rightly take our hats off to them as we read the history of those times.

People who were willing to obey God and not men. And it was very costly to them. Some of them, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paid for their resistance with their lives. So bearing in mind those words of Peter, I think we have to say that in Romans 13, Paul is not teaching Christians to obey men rather than God if there is a clash between the two.

But he is teaching Christians to submit to the normal good processes and demands of government. In fact, he draws his teaching to a head in verses 6 and 7 where he is saying this is what it boils down to, pay what you owe.

Taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Good afternoon, your majesty.

If I met her, which I never have, I would bow to her. Wouldn't you? Honor to whom honor is due. It's that sort of thing. And you'll notice a very interesting detail here. In verse 4, look with me at verse 4, the authority figure, the governor or the magistrate, is described as God's servant.

[19 : 56] Not God's servant in the sense that he or she may be personally a Christian, but God's servant in the sense of, in virtue of their office, they're serving God. And look at verse 6.

The people who administer taxation are called ministers of God. Now that's not the way you were thinking of them last week, was it, when you sat down to write your check to the Inland Revenue?

You think of that tax demand letter which you had perhaps about the beginning of July which said something like this. Dear Mr. McKillop, I write to advise you that by the 31st of July 2012 you need to send to the Inland Revenue your remittance of X pounds and 79p.

Yours sincerely, J. Smith, minister of God. Now that's the way Paul is describing him, you see, in verse 6. The means, this means then that the Christian who is, in the words of chapter 12, verse 2, being transformed by the renewal of his mind, this Christian is learning to be an increasingly law-abiding citizen.

Now that doesn't mean to say that Christians can't protest against bad law or that we can't lobby for better law. In fact, in the kind of democracy that we are blessed to be able to live in, it's important that Christians are in the forefront of those who are arguing the case for good legislation and protesting against the introduction of bad legislation.

[21 : 22] And there will be times when new legislation is passed in Parliament which is so bad that Christians have to refuse to submit to it and have to say, as the Apostle Peter did, we must obey God rather than men.

I'm sure you can think of one or two instances where that might happen in the very near future. But leaving aside those exceptional cases, Paul is teaching us to be law-abiding citizens even when it is irksome to obey the laws, laws which perhaps appear to be footling and silly.

Just to give a very small example of this, some of you will know I live out in the country in Ayrshire and I keep a flock of about 100 chickens. We have some land behind our house and we keep chickens there. And by law, I have to be registered as a chicken keeper in the records of DEFRA, the Department for Rural Affairs.

And this involves filling in a tiresome form every year. And on this form, I have to answer questions such as, and I got my form out yesterday, so I'm quoting from the official document.

Are other captive birds kept on the premises as well as your poultry? Presumably birds such as ostriches and emus. Is it possible to keep your poultry protected from wild birds' droppings?

[22 : 40] Is there a pond, lake, or open reservoir within 500 metres off the boundary of your premises? Et cetera, et cetera. Now, you can see why DEFRA need to keep tabs on poultry keepers like me in that kind of way.

I mean, that question about wild bird droppings, for example, is to do with preventing the spread of diseases like avian flu, which is a real problem. So it's good that we have an agricultural department which takes its responsibilities so seriously.

And yet, for me, to fill in that form every year is irksome. I groan every time the brown envelope drops through the post box. There is something in my nature. I guess it's a mixture of laziness and a dislike of red tape.

There's something in me that does not wish to comply. So that's why I have to read Romans 13 and take it seriously. Because Paul the Apostle is saying to me, brother, you must comply.

And if you don't, you're resisting the renewal of your mind and the transformation of your thinking. You're behaving like a man of the world who simply wants to cock a snook at authority.

[23 : 44] So there's the first thing government must be submitted to because it is instituted by God. It's part of God's way of regulating the world. Now, secondly, and more briefly, this is really the reverse side of the same coin.

To resist government authority amounts to resisting God himself. Look again at verse 2 here. 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. Now, when Paul speaks there of incurring judgment, I don't think he's talking about God's judgment on the final day of judgment.

He's talking in this context about the judgment and sentencing of a human court of law. So if I were to leave this building this afternoon and put on my balaclava and rob the Royal Bank of Scotland, I would very quickly feel the heavy hand of a police officer on my shoulder and I should incur the judgment of being sent to prison for a rather long time.

So to resist the authorities means that we will incur judgment. And in the words of verse 3, we shall find that the ruler or the government is a terror to us, something to be feared.

[25 : 05] But there is no fear for us if we keep the law. So Paul says halfway through verse 3, would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good and you'll receive his approval for he is God's servant for your good, for your happiness and welfare.

So the whole machinery of law and order, the government, the judiciary, the police and so on, exist for the good of society. But, halfway through verse 4, and this is an important but, if you do wrong, says Paul, be afraid, for the ruler does not bear the sword in vain.

And Paul is referring to capital punishment there, the sword which beheads the condemned criminal. Crucifixion in the Roman Empire was reserved for the lowest of the low. But other executions were carried out, not with an axe as they were in Britain later on, but with the sword of beheading.

And how does Paul understand judicial capital punishment here? Well, there it is in the second half of verse 4. The magistrate who orders capital punishment is acting, says Paul, as the servant of God, and God is using him as the agent of God's wrath to avenge serious crime.

So, in a case of capital punishment, the magistrate and the executioner are not personally taking vengeance on the wrongdoer, they're acting as God's agents.

[26 : 37] Just look back for a moment to chapter 12, verse 19, which helps us to get a bigger picture of this. 12, 19, Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written in the book of Deuteronomy, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

So, when we put together that verse, 12, 19, with chapter 13, verse 4, we see that God expresses his righteous vengeance against sin through the agency of the judicial system.

And in cases where capital punishment is required, it is to be understood not as a convulsive act of human vengeance, but as a controlled and proper outworking of the wrath of God against human sin.

Now, I realize, of course, that this teaching of Paul does not sit easily with much contemporary thinking about capital punishment, but it is, I think, surely what he's saying here. So, to try and sum up this section, Paul is saying to Christians, first, submit to the law of the land.

Government and law and order are good for society. But second, do so with a proper sense of fear, because where law is broken, there will be proper penalties.

[27 : 53] Now, as we close, let me point out something rather extraordinary. These seven verses here, unique in Paul's writing, are sandwiched between two sections in which Paul is teaching and urging Christians to love other people.

Look back to chapter 12, verses 9 and 10. Let love be genuine, verse 9. And then verse 10, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor.

And that section of verses 11 to 21 in chapter 12 are developing this theme of what it means to love other people. Paul gives us many instances of what it means to love others.

But now look on to chapter 13, verse 8. Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments against adultery, murder, so on, and any other commandment are summed up in this word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. love. So, are these first seven verses of chapter 13 a cuckoo in the nest of love?

[29 : 06] Should they perhaps not be there at all? Don't they belong there? Has perhaps some later editor shoved them in there when he shouldn't have done? No. Chapter 13 verses 1 to 7 are all part of Paul's teaching on what it means to live a life of love.

So, as our minds are transformed and renewed, and as we really learn to love other people, we learn to think beyond our immediate families and circles of friends and our own congregations, we think beyond that to the wider society which God rules.

And this passage is teaching us to value good government and by implication to play our part in upholding it and fostering it and respecting it.

So, Christians are citizens of two kingdoms, the eternal kingdom of heaven, and the temporary kingdom of this world. And the Apostle Paul is training us to play our loving part in both of those kingdoms.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we do want to thank you again that we live in the kind of democracy that you have blessed this country with.

[30 : 18] We know that it's far from perfect. We know that there are corruptions and wrong things that happen. But when we think of other nations where there is great misery and wickedness and endemic corruption, we're very glad and grateful that we live here in this country.

And we do pray that you will continue to allow us the kind of freedoms that we enjoy here. We do pray therefore for those who lead our country, both at Holyrood and at Westminster, and ask that you will give them strength, wisdom, and good judgment.

And for all of us, we pray that you will help us to love good government, indeed to submit to it and to further it and to foster it. And we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our great and wonderful governor.

Amen. Amen.