

“Thinking Clearly about Government”

Romans 13:1-7; Daniel 3:16-18 ¹

¹ 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. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Romans 13:1-7)

I once spent several years in another congregation preaching through the Bible on texts I had never used before in thirty years of preaching. That was a very interesting exercise, and I often had the opportunity to say, “I’ll bet you can see why I’ve never preached from this text before!” Our text this morning is one I avoided even then . . . but here we are.

I suspect that this text has seemed fairly outrageous to most who have read it, including those to whom it was first written, because human governments are seldom examples of any great virtue. Most governments, including our own, are plagued with self-interest even in their best moments, and what we are currently experiencing down the road could hardly be called “the best moments.”

When he wrote what we know as the Letter to the Romans, Paul had not yet visited Rome, but he was hoping to be able to visit before too long, and he used this letter as a form of introduction both to himself and to his understanding of the Message of Jesus.

Rome was not a beloved government. While the Roman Army did enforce a peace around the Mediterranean basin that had some benefit, known as the *Pax Romana*, this peace was established and maintained by cruelty that matched or exceeded anything we know in the world today, and most of Rome’s conquered nations cherished hopes of throwing off the yoke of Rome.

Jesus surely felt pressure from the Jewish Zealots to throw His growing political power behind their guerilla efforts against Rome, but He didn’t do it, because it is not by military force or violence that God’s Kingdom comes. So it is that in our text, Paul was likely counseling the Christians in Rome to avoid joining themselves with violent revolutionary movements. And beyond this, in those days the New Testament Christians still expected Jesus to return fairly quickly, so involvement with earthly governmental concerns seemed an ill-advised distraction from the work of evangelism and mission.

Let’s look at this text for a moment and then try to draw some applications for our lives today. First of all, it’s interesting that in verses 1 and 5 Paul used words for “be subject to” and “to submit to” rather than the stronger word for “obey.”² Paul seems to have recognized that circumstances are likely to arise from time to time in which followers of the Way of Jesus must choose between what we understand to be obedience to God and the requirements of government, and he was reminding the Roman believers that we who are in Christ have a dual

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 6, 2013.

² “Romans,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, electronic version.

citizenship—one in this world and one in the Heavenly Kingdom (Philippians 3:20). We must give attention to both while giving priority to one.

When Paul wrote that “*there is no authority except that which God has established*” (Romans 13:1), we recognize on the one hand that even Satan has no authority except that which God has allowed (Luke 4:6, 10:18); while on the other hand, we acknowledge a very real responsibility to influence the affairs of government.

Our Founding Fathers were not uniformly Christian,³ but even if they had been, they would not have created a “Christian-only” nation any more than God has created a “Christian-only” world, because neither approach leads to freedom for any persons except those in power. As was true in our own original colonies, in almost every case across history where a religious group has enjoyed favored status, it has resisted allowing religious freedom to those with differing opinions. Sadly, it could be argued that more wars have been fought, more persecutions carried out, and more lives lost in the name of religion than for any other single cause.

Christians ought to be involved in politics, not leaving the governing of our communities and of our country entirely to the opinions of unbelievers. We need to be unashamedly involved in influencing public policy, but we need to run from every temptation to require others to accept our own understandings of morality. Christians who really understand the principles involved will never seek to use the power of government for the advancement of their own faith.

Beyond this, honesty compels us to admit that even this morning, while we complain that our government is both dysfunctional and too intrusive in our lives and while we whine that our taxes are too high, most of us are at the very same time trying to figure out how to secure more money and more benefits and services from the Federal Government. And although next month will mark fifty years since President Kennedy’s assassination, his words, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,”⁴ faded into oblivion long ago.

Taking all this together, while we recognize our very real need for a necessary and justifiable humility in the effort, we also acknowledge our obligation to voice objection to governmental policy where we believe it to be in error, particularly in matters of liberty and justice. Paul’s admonition to subjection to the state is not to be confused with unthinking, docile conformity.⁵

Dr. King made this point quite eloquently in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and I’m going to quote him at some length. Writing to white clergy who objected to his efforts to influence government policies, Dr. King wrote, “You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws.

“One may well ask: ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’ The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. . . . One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’

³ See Alf Mapp, Jr., *The Faiths of our Fathers: What America’s Founders Really Believed* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

⁴ John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, January 20, 1961. www.ushistory.org/documents/ask-not.htm

⁵ *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. And in the face of increasing terrorist threats both at home and abroad, do we dare to take seriously the biblical affirmation that “*When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone’s way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them*”? (Proverbs 16:7).

“Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. . . .

“One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law. . . .

“So the question is not *whether* we will be extremists, but *what kind* of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

“There was a time when the . . . early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a *thermometer* that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a *thermostat* that transformed the mores of society.

“Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators.’ But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were ‘a colony of heaven,’ called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. . . . By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

“Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are.”⁶

I’ll return to Dr. King’s letter shortly, but first we need to remind ourselves that while Christians may not always agree on those issues that require redress, that which has come to be called “civil disobedience” has a long history. Among many examples that could be cited across the centuries, let me select just one. You’ll know the story:

¹⁶ *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to [the king], “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up”* (Daniel 3:16-18).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had no doubt that God *could* deliver them, but they did not know that God *would*. Though God was *able* to save them, they acknowledged that there might be a reason unknown to them that would cause God *not* to do so. But whether God saved them in this situation or not, these three men were committed to be faithful to God, believing that God would keep faith with them, even if they didn’t know just how that would be done.

We do well to note that it was not until Daniel’s friends made their commitment to faith without regard for consequences that the fourth figure (the angel) appeared in the furnace. Even in those situations where God does intend to act in miraculous ways, God will not do it until we have given Him complete freedom to act in our lives.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf

As G. K. Chesterton put it, “Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to *live* taking the form of a readiness to *die*.”⁷ South African bishop and Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu declared not so very long ago that “There is nothing the government can do to me that will stop me from being involved in what I believe God wants me to do. I do not do it because I like doing it. I do it because I am under what I believe to be the influence of God’s hand. I cannot help it.

“When I see injustice, I cannot keep quiet, for, as Jeremiah says, when I try to keep quiet, God’s Word burns like a fire in my breast. But what is it that they can ultimately do? The most awful thing that they can do is to kill me, and death is not the worst thing that could happen to a Christian.”⁸

As Carl Schurz memorably put it in the Senate shortly after the Civil War, “My country, right or wrong. When right, to be *kept* right; when wrong, to be *put* right.”⁹ In this era of aggressive civil religion, we need to keep reminding ourselves that “The American Way of Life” is not a synonym for “Christian Discipleship,” nor is “The American Dream” the same thing as “the Christian Hope.”

Well, after all this, so what? There are many avenues open to us as we consider how to be Christian citizens in ways that honor the liberty God has given and tens of thousands have died to protect. Let me quickly mention five.

In the **first** place, we can take more seriously our responsibilities as Christian parents to raise our children in the “training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). We can make such instruction a higher priority in our family life than the competing claims of athletic and other activities. Christian instruction is not now, and never has been, the responsibility of the schools. It’s the responsibility of the home. No one else is going to do this if we don’t do it, and there is no higher privilege.

Second, we in the church can take more seriously our own continuing responsibility to involve ourselves in the “training and instruction of the Lord.” We can continually improve the discipleship opportunities we provide for persons of all ages, so that we and our children understand more and more of what this “salt and light” thing is really all about.

Third, we can do all we can to discover the true nature of legislation being considered at local, state and national levels, and we can communicate our convictions to our elected leaders. We really ought to so frequently communicate with our representatives in government that they feel themselves to be our next-door neighbors. We might even consider becoming such representatives ourselves.

Fourth, we can become encouragers and supporters of those Christian groups that function in our schools in ways congruent with religious liberty. Some of these include *See You at the Pole*, the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes*, *Young Life*, *Club 121*, and the direct ministries of our own congregation.

Finally, we can promote Christian values in our nation by taking the time to examine the business practices of the merchants with whom we do business, of the manufacturers whose products we purchase, and of the firms in whose stock we invest. Every one of us spends a great deal of money each year. What might happen if we took seriously the power for good that lies in

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Leadership*, vol. 10, no. 4.

⁸ Richard H. Schmidt, *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 328.

⁹ Schurz, Carl, remarks in the Senate, February 29, 1872, *The Congressional Globe*, vol. 45, p. 1287.

that spending and worked together to influence business ethics with as much vigor as we pursue shopping bargains? What might happen?

Well, here's how Dr. King concluded his letter: "One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God *sat down* at lunch counters, they were in reality *standing up* for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. . . .

"Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not-too-distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."¹⁰

May God give to us wisdom and courage for the living of these days, so that when all is said and done we may sing, with the patriots who have gone before us, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"¹¹

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., loc. cit.

¹¹ Samuel F. Smith, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"; tune from *Thesaurus Musicus*, c. 1745.