

West Valley Church
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Romans: Faith, Family, Fullness

Romans 13

When Pastor Mike asked me to preach, I was looking forward to getting to preach one more sermon for our Romans series. He told me chapter 13, and so I looked in my Bible to see what I had agreed to. My Bible says in the chapter heading: submission to governing authorities. And I thought, you have got to be kidding me. Earlier this summer I preached, and part of the passage was on circumcision and now I get the government?

Well I started reading commentaries to learn more about the context of this passage. One commentary said this passage is surprising. Another said this passage is unique. Verses one through seven is the most difficult, potentially disturbing, and even possibly dangerous of all Paul's texts. From another commentary, "This is the most controversial passage in Paul's letter". Sounds exciting right? So if you don't see me preaching again, this was the one that did it. What does submitting to authority have to do with the sanctified life? Remember, that has been the focus of Paul in this letter: teaching the Church to be set apart wholly for God and His purposes, and to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, what the Bible calls "sanctified. So how does that relate to governing authorities? Let's see. The controversy is really just in verse 1-2. It says this:

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.
(Romans 13:1-20)

Before we get into what Paul is saying to the church in Rome, let me start by clarifying what he is not saying:

Paul is not saying that all people in authority are chosen by God. Paul's not saying that leaders can do what they want because God put them there. Paul's also not saying that if you rebel against the government, you rebel against God. He's not saying we're not supposed to question or challenge or even protest authority.

What Paul is not saying, is usually what gets said to make this passage so controversial. In the past, these verses have been dangerous because it has been quoted and used to harm others.

British Royals cited these verses to chastise rebellious American revolutionaries. American revolutionists cited the same verses to start our government. Slave owners in early America justified the institution of slavery by quoting it. Nazis in Germany quoted Romans 13 to give religious authority to genocide. I wish I could say it doesn't happen

anymore, but about five years ago our government specifically cited this verse in support of separating parents and children at US border.

So leaders have quoted these verses to defend their laws and their political agendas for a long time. Anytime you hear someone use the Bible to defend what they want, you should question them and see for yourself, if they are manipulating God's Word to help themselves. Not just political leaders but all people, myself included, because the context of Scripture matters. God's Word is to help us follow Him, to help us love others. Not to defend what we want. Many leaders have quoted Romans 13:1-2 to defend their desires to do something unloving. I wish these leaders that quote these two verses would continue reading until they get to verse 4 which says:

For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. (Romans 13:4)

Authorities are supposed to help others as servants of God, but does that mean they always honor God? No. If you have been given power, you are to use that power to help others who are powerless. Does everybody use their power to help others? No. Do we follow authority that goes against how God wants us to live? No. Biblical tradition clearly indicates that God's people cannot follow the dictates of authorities, religious or civil, should they require something that goes against what God says to do. Daniel was thrown into the lion's den for disobeying his government, because they told him he could no longer worship God. In countries where they are not allowed to worship God, they rebel against authority. Do they risk civil punishment if they are caught? Yes. When civil authority opposes God and his will for us, disapproval and disobedience may be necessary for Christian individual's and churches.

Authority and power have been established by God because He is the creator of everything. So for the Jew being persecuted in Rome, they can have hope knowing that God is all powerful and someday the Roman leaders will have to answer to God for how they treated others with the power they had. Someday we'll answer to God for how we acted with that power we had too. God is the creator, and He gives us the ability to create. God is loving, and he gives us the ability to love. God is all powerful, and he gives us power. God establishes authority, but we all have power in some way, it's up to us to use our power for good. If we don't, we get to explain that to God someday. So God uses government to help carry out his will. Those in authority are supposed to be God's servants for good. Keeping the peace is what Paul is getting to when he says to submit to governing authorities in verse 1. To provide some more context to what Paul is saying, we need to remember last week, in chapter 12, which is what Paul wrote leading up to writing verse 1 on government. He said this:

"Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.... Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; live at peace with everyone.... (Romans 12:10, 13, 14)

This is the context for Romans 13. Two chapters but one big thought on living the sanctified life. Last week Pastor Mike said that 12:9-13 is about Christian Love in everyday action. and then verses 12:14-21 is about Christian love toward others: neighbors AND enemies. So to

help us live Christian love toward our neighbors and enemies, and to help us live at peace with everyone, Paul says:

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 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 13:6-7)

The main point Paul is making in the first 7 verses is not as controversial when read in the context of Paul's letter. A way we live our faith and love our neighbors and enemies: pay your taxes.

That is Paul's point. Sorry for those hoping for more controversy this morning.

For many Jews, Rome was seen as the oppressor, the supreme enemy of God's people at the time. Paul portrays the Roman authorities as tax collectors. They are worthy of respect as they are tax collecting servants for the common good. Paul tells the believers in Rome to follow the laws and pay their taxes, seeking to live at peace with everyone. But Paul's words do not invite uncritical devotion to or worship of any political person or entity. All authority us under God. So pay your taxes, but give your allegiance to God, not Caesar, not Trump, or Biden or anyone, but God. This is the unified message of both Paul and Jesus.

So in chapter 12 Paul writes all these ways we are to love and live at peace with others, which includes paying our taxes and being good citizens in the beginning of 13, he then more ways to live in peace and love others in 13:8 -

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Alyssa and I do not like debt. I don't know anyone who does actually. We graduated college with 100k in student loan debt and that was not counting our parents who helped, scholarships we got, etc. We don't like debt and it was a huge burden lifted when we paid off our loans. When you have debt, you are trapped. There were times when we wanted to do something special or fun, but we knew how much debt we had so we didn't do it. I don't like debt, and neither does Paul. He tells us to pay our taxes and pay our debts, so we don't owe anyone anything. But we do owe something. The reason we are in debt to love others, is because of Jesus. Jesus chose to die for us, to pay the price for our sins, He paid our debt, we couldn't pay it. All we have to do is loves others.

The love command fulfills the law, but no theory or theology of love can do that; we can't just talk about love; love has to be put into practice. Love fulfills the law, because those who love, do nothing the law forbids; and those who love, do more than the law requires. Paul says in verse 8, "for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law". The Greek word here for "others" refers to outsiders. Not your friends, not your family, not people who like you or vote like you, but people who aren't like you or they don't like you. Love your neighbor, can

easily be understood to mean love for the one who is like me, but love is not Christian, unless it includes loving everyone else. Paul continues:

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. (Romans 13:11-14)

The Greek word here for hour or time is Kairos and it signifies divine timing unlike the word Kronos, which is calendar time. Kairos is a divinely determined moment in the time process and is used technically in the New Testament with reference to the time before Christ's return. Paul is saying that in one sense our salvation is a present reality when you choose to follow Jesus. When you've been forgiven of your sins you are saved, like Paul already said in Romans 10, if you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart, you will be saved. In another sense, our salvation is incomplete until Christ returns to give us his glory. We are saved from our sin now, but when Jesus returns, we will be saved from evil, pain, sadness, and everything else that is wrong with the broken world we live in. It is the future salvation that Paul speaks of when he says our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. Every day brings us one day closer to the day Jesus returns.

Paul expected the return of Jesus. The early church expected His return at any moment. Therefore, the church had the urgency to be ready, but expectancy has grown dim and faint over the last 2000 years. It could be later tonight, or it could be another 2000 years from now. No one knows when Jesus will return so we need to wake up and pursue God as we love others the way He does. In the Bible, sleep is often used as an image of spiritual laziness. We need to wake up and put aside sin and evil so there is nothing keeping us from following Jesus. And so that nothing you do, or say, or post online keeps others from following Jesus. And so nothing keeps you from loving others.

We need to put on armor of light, so that way we can be God's light in darkness. Evil can't eliminate evil; darkness can't eliminate darkness. Only light can eliminate dark. When we are light, whether it's daytime or nighttime, we reflect light, we reflect God.

Paul talks a lot about clothing and Jesus. "Put on Christ." We make a choice each time we get dressed in the morning, what will I wear? What will people see when they look at me? Paul is saying, "Jesus"!! "Put on" Jesus so when people see you, they'll see Jesus. Too many Christians are not known for putting on Jesus, they're known for putting on Trump, or Biden, or anyone else. Each morning, we need to choose, what will people see when I'm with them? Let's put on Jesus each day. So no matter where we are, we reflect Him. Is the kind of person you are at night the same as who you are during the day when others can see you? Are you different when you come to church? Are you different online? Are you different during election season?

Theologian Klaus Wengst, called the early Christian community a sphere of interrupted violence in the midst of a violent world, the Roman empire. The Roman Empire isn't what it

used to be, but what about the American empire? Are American followers of Jesus a sphere of interrupted violence in America? Or are we no different than the violence, or the hate, or the pain we see in our culture?

Peacemaking is the identity and mission of God displayed in Jesus. Followers of Jesus are energized by the Spirit to participate in the mission and love of God. The Sanctified life means in tax season, in politics, in night and day, in how we love others: we put on Jesus.

Prayer

Closing:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law... clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ... (Romans 13:8, 14)

Only light can eliminate dark. As we leave today, let us remember to daily put on Jesus so we can reflect light, so we reflect Jesus. What will people see in you? Put on Jesus.

God bless you as you reflect Him this week, see you later.