

Introduction:

What are the three things that your mother told you never to talk about at the dinner table? Religion, politics, and money, right? Our sermon topic for today is actually on Christians and government, so that's two down. I guess it's a good thing we're not eating right now.

Today we're going to try and answer the question, as Christians, what do we do with this thing called government? How should we think or feel about it, should we support it or not support it, should we be involved or not?

Paul writes something incredibly dense here in Romans 13. These seven short verses are crammed pack with so many deep thoughts that are relevant to our lives that I could write a 500 page book on it. Unfortunately, we don't have that kind of time, nor do some of

you have that kind of patience. So, if you could, please hang tight with me for the next fifteen to twenty minutes as we attempt to unpack this nugget of theology.

In order to understand the issue of Christians and government, we're going to explore two crucial statements that Paul makes in this passage. First, what does it mean that God established authorities? And second, what does it mean to "be subject to" these authorities? If you noticed, I reversed the order that these two statements were made in the text. I believe that in order to determine how we are to be subject to the government, we need to decide how we believe that it is established.

Transition: And so, the first question that we must answer is this:

What does it mean that God established authorities?

To give a little background to this question, we need to look at how and when God first established governing authorities, which is found in 1 Samuel 8:4-22: In this passage, the people of Israel became dissatisfied with the priests ruling over them, especially of Samuel's sons. They demand for a king so that they could be like the other nations. God tells Samuel that they are not rejecting him; they are rejecting God. And then he tells Samuel to give them this warning: if they have a king like the other nations, this king will take their sons and use them for war and take their daughters and use them as servants. He will take the best of their flocks and crops, and they will cry out to God for relief from the burden of the king. However, because they were disobedient and rejected God, he will ignore

their cries. And so Samuel gives the people this warning, but they ignore it and continue to demand a king.

So, God gave the people a king, Saul, who was a good king, for a while. But he disobeyed God and was replaced by David. David was a good king, but towards the end of his life, his household began to fall apart. After family feuds that would make the Sopranos nervous, Solomon was made king. The kingdom split apart and because kings were selfish and greedy, the people of God fell and were never the same again.

God established authorities, but history shows that they did not always follow God. Logic would say that if they are not following God, then God must not be ordaining all of their actions. The authorities in Israel made decisions to turn away from God, and prophets were sent to warn them against

those decisions. But Israel didn't listen and so God gave them over to their enemies. Even the authorities, those established by God, had the ability to be disobedient and received their due punishment.

Establishing authority and ordaining or supporting those decisions that the authorities make are two different things. One commentator said it like this: God is like a librarian. The librarian places the books in order, but he or she does not guarantee that the content of all of the books is good.

One important thing to remember in this whole conversation is that that Paul was not writing about or to a Christian government. That didn't even exist. In fact, he was making a distinction between the followers of Christ and the pagan run government.

Some might say that Romans 13 is talking about the ideal government; authorities are only established by God if they act in a certain, "godly" way. And so that gives us the license to pick and choose which governments are God-established and which ones we should follow.

But that's not what the Bible says. In Scripture, there is no such thing as a completely good government or a completely evil government.

If you look at what Paul writes in Romans 13 and what John writes in Revelation 13, you actually get to see the dual nature of authorities. Romans 13 appears to describe a government that by all accounts follows God and seeks justice. In Revelation 13, however, the government is described as a beast that "had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a

blasphemous name.” Everyone who did not truly follow Christ worshiped this beast who spoke blasphemy and waged war against God.

Now remember the Bible has to be read as a whole; you cannot pick and choose passages to read without understanding their contexts. Neither Paul nor John indicated that their writings described different, specific categories of government. It seems like they are both talking about the same thing. And so, by reading the two together, we are given two natures within authority: good and evil.

Transition: So what does this mean for us today?

Historically, people weren't too troubled by the thought of God establishing government until WWII Germany. The big question is, does this passage mean that God divinely ordained Hitler and Nazism? If you would read it out of

context and follow it to the letter, then yes. Hitler certainly claimed to be doing the work of God. And yet, nobody would say that he was acting like a Christian.

But let's ask a question whose answer is not so obvious: Is America the only God-established government? What about Iraq, Afghanistan, or North Korea? Some would say yes, God established and still leads America. But remember, our own short history is full of things that would not be considered Christ-like, though they were committed by Christians: slavery, oppression of women, and exploitation of the Natives; the list goes on and on.

So, what did Paul mean when he wrote, “For there is no authority except that which God has established?” Samuel says that God gave us kings, but that was only because we didn't trust him. Some of these kings did good

things, but they also did evil as well. Romans and Revelation show us that there are two natures within all authorities. And history shows us that all nations act justly and unjustly.

John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian who had quite a bit to say about Christians' interactions with government, wrote that, "God is not said to create or institute or ordain the powers that be, but only to order them, to put them in order, sovereignly to tell them where they belong, what is their place."

God created authorities for the purpose of order in this world, but he doesn't necessarily approve of everything that they do.

Transition: With this in mind, we move forward to our second question:

What does it mean to be subject to our governing authorities?

To best answer this question, we need to look at and understand our own identities as Christians. Peter gives us a glimpse into this when he writes in 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." In the Old Testament, these phrases are all used to refer to the nation of Israel, who was a real nation, defined by geographical boundaries, with political power. It was also a spiritual nation under the Kingship of God. Peter, however, is writing to Christians who are not one single political, geographical, or ethnic body. And he is telling them that their allegiance and citizenship to God supersedes their own original ethnic, national, and religious identities. Paul writes in Galatians 3:28 that, "There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, for all are one in Christ Jesus."

As Christians, we need to understand that we belong first to the Kingdom of God. A lot of people were offended when Derek Webb, member of contemporary Christian band Caedmon's call, penned this line in his song "A King and A Kingdom." "My first allegiance is not to a flag, a country, or a man. My first allegiance is not to democracy or blood; it's to a king and a kingdom." Now, maybe it's because he is being so blunt in his phrasing, I don't know, but why should we be offended by this idea? When Christ returns and heaven comes to earth, there will be no more America, or Canada, or Japan, or England. All nations will stream to the mountain of God and bow down before him.

So, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, what does it mean for us to be subject to our governing authorities?

Transition: In order to answer this question, there are two things that we need to understand.

1) First, we need to recognize that there is a difference between "obedience" and "being subject to" or "subordination."

John Howard Yoder notes that in 13:1, Paul uses a Greek word which does not mean obedience in the traditional sense that we choose to do the will of the other whether we agree with it or not. There are other, more specific Greek words, which could have been used to denote that meaning. Instead, "What Paul calls for...is subordination...Subordination is significantly different from obedience. The conscientious objector who refuses to do what government demands, but still remains under the sovereignty of that government and accepts the penalties which it imposes, or the Christian who refuses to worship Caesar but

still permits Caesar to put him or her to death, is being subordinate even though not obeying.”

God asks us to be subject to, not for obedience.

2) Secondly, we need to understand that the Kingdom of God is different than the Kingdom of this world, and when we claim to be a part of the God’s kingdom, we have to be different.

Towards the end of Matthew 20, James, John, and their mother request that they would be able to sit at the right and left of Jesus in heaven. Jesus rebukes them, saying in vs. 25 that, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” Although secular authorities exert their will through power, power and position should not be the aspiration of a Christian. Instead, we are to be servants of all. The first should be last and the

last should be first. This same passage appears in Mark and Luke as well. For it to appear in three of the four gospels says to me that this is a very important teaching to the church. Christians are not called to be like the governmental rulers; we may be subject to them but we are different from them.

In Romans chapter 12, which we talked about last week, Paul writes about the personal responsibilities of Christians. We are not to take revenge or repay evil with evil, etc. Now, in chapter 13, Paul writes that we need to submit to authorities because they were put in place by God. In some ways, it seems like these two chapters don’t match up.

Individually, we aren’t supposed to take revenge or repay evil with evil, but we are supposed to submit to a government that does take revenge and repays an action for an action. In fact, our justice system is built upon the principle of repayment; if you do this, then

we will do this back to you. So, is Paul is saying that we should not do those things that our God-ordained government is allowed to do? How does that work?

Remember, authorities were put into place to create and keep order. Unfortunately, this is not always done in a Godly fashion. God does not endorse every governmental action, and we shouldn't either. Submission to authority does not mean that we always agree with or go along with every decision. I would also suggest that submission and participation are two very different things.

Again John Howard Yoder writes that,

“The Christian who accepts subjection to government retains moral independence and judgment. The authority of government is not self-justifying. Whatever government exists is ordered by God; but the text does not say that

whatever the government does or asks of its citizens is good.”

We can see examples of this sort of subordination throughout the New Testament.

In Acts chapters 6-8, Stephen stands up to the Sanhedrin, the ruling council over the Jews, and accuses them of being stiff-necked like their forefathers, and that they resist the Holy Spirit. He calls them out and says that they murdered the Messiah; these are some pretty strong suggestions. Stephen was not acquiescing and being respectful to the authorities; he knew that they were wrong and was determined to make his voice heard. And they stoned him.

In Matthew 22:15-22, some Pharisees, intent on trapping Jesus, bring to him a denarius, a Roman coin, and ask Jesus if it was right to pay the imperial tax. This was a tax that was

placed on the subjects of Rome who weren't necessarily Roman citizens. It seems like it might have been natural for Jesus to say no; after all, he wasn't a Roman citizen and wouldn't receive the benefits of being a Roman citizen even though he would have to pay the taxes. But Jesus recognized that this was the decree set forth by Caesar and was willing, in this case, to be subordinate to it.

Transition: So what does this mean for us?

As citizens first to the Kingdom of God, how are we supposed to be subject to governing authorities who do not always act Christ-like?

I personally like how the early Anabaptists did it: "To "be subject" meant to obey the government in all things good. However, if the demands of government conflicted with their covenant with Christ, then Christ must be obeyed."

Conclusion:

So when we walk out of here today, what is it that we should remember? What is Paul trying to tell us about Christianity and government?

God established authorities for order in the world, but he does not approve of everything that they do. Because God established these authorities, we should be subject to them, except in the case that we are being asked to do something that violates our relationship with Christ.

We are citizens of this world, but most of all, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Our allegiance is to Him first, and everything that we do should be seeking after His will in this world. Sometimes this leaves us in a messy position where we are going to have to choose Christ over our own country. But when those

moments do occur, God will be there to guide
us.