**Who’s in Charge Here?**

**Text: Romans 13:1**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Our text today is that first verse from the 13th chapter of Romans: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

That’s what St. Paul wrote as he prepared to travel to Rome. He was writing his own letter of introduction to the church there. Paul didn’t establish the congregation in Rome, perhaps Peter did. And Paul had never met these folks. But now he is getting ready to travel to Rome, so he sends this letter of introduction ahead of him.

There had been tension between this young church and the Roman Emperor. In fact, the Emperor had expelled the Jewish-Christians from Rome in A.D. 49. But they were allowed back in A.D. 54 and now, 3 years later, Paul is counseling cooperation with those in power. Perhaps he’s saying, “Hey folks, cool it with the politics until you get yourself more firmly established; or until the Emperor does something so *totally* outrageous that you *must* oppose him. At the moment, it’s not going to do the Gospel any good if you get kicked out of Rome again.”

That’s the spin that a lot of biblical scholars put on these words, and maybe they’re right, but Paul himself doesn’t qualify his statement that way. He just says, flat out, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”

I wonder what our nation’s Founders thought of these words? They were, after all, familiar with the Bible. One of them, John Witherspoon, was even a Presbyterian minister. But on this day, July 2, in 1776, gathered in Philadelphia as the Continental Congress, they had before them a draft document that would put them in open rebellion *against* the governing authorities. Those authorities, of course, were the King and the Parliament of Great Britain, the document was the Declaration of Independence, and two days later, after Thomas Jefferson made a few edits and cleaned it up, they signed it.

Now, to be fair, the document they signed was based not on biblical but on philosophical grounds. Its call for revolution appealed to *nature’s* God, not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, so maybe they weren’t listening to anything in the Bible that might discourage their radical designs.

“Let every person by subject to the governing authorities.” How are Christian citizens to make sense of this? Especially when Christians find themselves and their neighbors oppressed by political tyranny and state-sponsored crimes against humanity; Nazi Germany being the classic example. Are we not then called to oppose the government? Does not the God of justice demand such principled opposition?

The fact of the matter is that the Bible does not speak with one voice on the question of either supporting or opposing the government. Paul and Peter seem to take the “Support the Establishment” approach. But the Old Testament prophets are not at all shy about *criticizing* those in authority; criticizing them for oppressing the poor and crushing the needy.

In fact, there are two broad streams of thought in the Bible about government, and they go back to the days – described in 1 Samuel – when the Israelites demanded that God give them a king. One stream is the prophetic view and the other is the establishment view. The prophetic view says that those in power are bad: they confiscate your property and oppress the people. The establishment view says that those in power are good: they have been placed there by God and will be defended by God and should be obeyed.

So, is government good or bad? Should it be supported or opposed? The Bible’s ambivalence on this question has often confused Americans. An older woman was holding a protest sign a few years ago. It said, “Government, get your hands off my Medicare!” Wait a minute: Medicare is a government program. The government’s hands are all over Medicare by definition. The woman is confused: torn between an ideological conviction that government is bad, and the reality that the government is *helping* her through a program called Medicare!

Things become less ambivalent if we drill down into the scriptures a bit further. The biblical view of government is clearly grounded in 2 principles: the sovereignty of God, and the love ethic of Jesus. Let’s consider these in turn.

In the Bible, there is only one authority that ultimately matters. That authority is Almighty God. God is the Supreme Sovereign over all that is. God is the Source and Goal of life. God’s providential hand guides the affairs of the nations and the flow of history. Who’s in charge? *God’s in charge*! Isaiah says that the nations and their governments are like drops of water in God’s mighty bucket (Isaiah 40:15). And from that bucket, says Amos, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (Amos 5:24). God alone is the ultimate authority. As Paul says, “There *is* no authority *except* from God” (Rom. 13:1b). Nations and their governments come into being at the invitation of God, and nations and their governments can be wiped out by the judgment of God.

God alone is Sovereign. Which is why there was resistance to the idea of Israel having a king. Those who didn’t want a king said, “We already have a King; our King is God.” Well, they got their king, and the Old Testament prophets opposed their kings because they betrayed the authority given to them by God who is the *real* King. Jesus weighs in on this question of ultimate authority when he says to Pilate, “You have no authority over me because my authority comes from a higher place; my Kingdom is not of this world.” And indeed the biblical basis for the American Revolution – a basis not enshrined in the Declaration of Independence but proclaimed from church pulpits – was that we will have God alone as our King, and no earthly king will ever again dominate us. This is the affirmation that we sing in the final verse of *My Country, ‘Tis of Thee*:

“Our fathers God, to thee, Author of liberty,

To thee we sing;

Long may our land be bright, with freedom’s holy light,

Protect us by they might, Great God our King!”

A rock solid belief in the Sovereignty of God sent Pilgrims and Puritans across the sea to worship God and structure society as they heard God calling them to do so. Loyalty to the Kingdom of God led the people of this nation to battle the evils of slavery, and child labor, and deadly conditions in the workplace. When we pledge allegiance to the flag, we pledge allegiance to one nation, *under God*, with liberty and justice for all,” and thus we affirm our commitment to our Sovereign’s mandate that freedom and justice be established throughout the land. Not just freedom, but freedom and justice in creative tension. That is the mandate of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone rules over the heavens and the earth.

If God alone is Sovereign, if God alone is our Authority, then what are we to make of earthly authority? What are we to make of the laws and regulations established by that authority, whether or not we agree with them? Part of the answer lies further down in Romans 13. In verse 8 we read, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” This is our second principle, the love ethic of Jesus, proclaimed in his new law – his new commandment – that we love one another (John 13:34). “Owe no one anything,” Paul says, “except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Now it’s interesting that this verse comes immediately after Paul’s admonition to the Romans to pay their taxes. And remember that Paul knew nothing of our verse numbers; they came several centuries later. So what Paul says in our verses 7 and 8 is really all one thought:

“Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” In other words, don’t run up a debt to the government by failing to pay your taxes, and don’t run up a debt to your neighbors by failing to love them, and in fact it’s all part of obeying the *law* of love. Love, after all, is not a sentimental feeling or a romantic emotion but is rather the commitments that we make and the work that we do to hold a community together. And community means not just family and friends, not just neighborhood and church, but in fact the entire social order. Government is established, laws are enacted, regulations are put in place and taxes are paid in order to create and maintain a society in which human beings can prosper and justice is possible. Thus God has established the principle of government in order to maintain the fabric of community, uphold the common good and serve the law of love.

It follows that the authority of earthly governments is to be honored so long as they serve the law of love and uphold the common good, and governments are to be criticized to the extent that they *fail* to uphold the common good. In other words, our respect for earthly authority is contingent upon their respect for God’s law of love; their resolve to serve the common good; their commitment to preserve community.

The distinguished jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes put it this way: “Taxes are the price we pay for civilized society.” Given our sinful human tendency to insist on our own way, and stomp on whoever gets in our way, laws and regulations are created, and taxes are paid to maintain those laws and regulations, so that human selfishness and greed won’t tear apart the fabric of community.

So maybe Paul is saying that we should all respect and obey the governing authorities, *so long as they serve God by maintaining the fabric of community*.

Two concluding observations:

First, it takes a strong government to strengthen community. That’s what the Founders recognized when they wrote the Constitution. They created a strong central government to replace the limited government of the Articles of Confederation. We Americans don’t talk about this enough. We’re so concerned about the dangers of excessive political power that we don’t realize the dangers of excessive economic power. In fact, it takes both a strong government *and* a robust private sector to maintain community. Government unchecked by private economic power would confiscate our property and make us slaves to the state. The private sector, unchecked by government, would pay starvation wages, make risky investments, wreck the environment and destroy community. Both are important. A government accountable to the people is the instrument by which *We the People* can *choose* the kind of community that we want. Without government as a tool, we are at the mercy of anyone who accumulates enough economic power to bully the rest of us. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Humanity’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; humanity’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

Second, one way in which the common good is being threatened right now is by the willingness of private insurance companies to pay outrages charges to health care providers, and then pass on the cost to the public in the form of high insurance premiums. There are some in Washington who want to blame those high premiums on the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare), but the cost of health care – in the form of both insurance premiums and costs paid to care providers – was escalating well before the ACA was passed in 2010. Health care costs are lowest in those countries where *the government itself* is the sole provider of health insurance. Why? Because when the government alone pays the bills, the government can bargain down the rates of health care providers to affordable levels.

That’s why, what we need in the United States of America right now, is not the scrapping of the Affordable Care Act, but using the ACA as a stepping stone to a single payer system similar to the systems in most other developed democracies. In other words, Medicare for all. Americans pay, on average, about twice as much for health care as the citizens of our richest trading partners. What’s the difference? They have universal health insurance, usually provided by the government; we don’t. They have a system where all pay a little and are covered by much. We are at risk of going back to a system where only the well-off will pay a whole lot, and everyone else will be out of luck. In Canada, where I lived for 30 years, the government provides the health insurance, and my annual premium was about $300. That was the *annual* premium: $300! And it provided the kind of excellent health care to which all God’s children ought to have access.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for [the government] is God’s servant for your good.” That’s what the Bible says. That’s why the Founders of this nation, in 1787, created a strong central government: to “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, *promote the general Welfare*, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” That’s the way that the Preamble to the Constitution puts it. As Benjamin Franklin said on July 4, 1776, right after he affixed his signature to Mr. Jefferson’s parchment: “We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.” May God grant us the strength, and the courage, to hang together, and maintain the fabric of our national community. Amen.