

Romans 13:1-7

God & Country

Main idea: Jesus is the King, and His Kingdom has no end.

My hope this morning is for all of us to recognize Jesus as King. The Bible is clear that no matter what country you live in, or where you're originally from, Jesus is King over all the earth, and God invites all of us to trust in Him, and find salvation and true, abundant, eternal life in Him.¹

And yet, people don't usually think about Jesus first when they hear the word "king."

There's been a lot of discussion and disagreement over the years, and really over the centuries, about the relationship that Christians and churches ought to have with the kings, countries, and governments that they find themselves under. And there have been seasons in church history in which Christians have really gone to one extreme or the other.

For example, in the 4th century AD, under Constantine, and then to an even greater extent Theodosius, we saw the first merger of church and state so that Christianity was the only approved religion in the Roman Empire. And really as a direct result of that merger, the Roman Catholic Church was born.

¹ Hebrews 1:8, 1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 15:3

On the other extreme, however, there have been cults who have rebelled against governments in various ways, and have sought to even establish communes free from the rule of government.

And as Christ-followers, we might have mixed thoughts about all this. On the one hand, this is where God's placed us, and we ought to be good citizens.² But on the other hand, our country's laws don't always glorify God, and Christians sometimes need to be willing to stand up against their governments in order to be faithful to God.³

And then when you add in things like patriotism, nationalism, and acts of terrorism, sometimes we might be tempted to be led by our emotions rather than the word of God. So how should Christians live in regards to all this? And no matter where we find ourselves, how do we honor Christ as King?

Paul addresses this in Romans 13.

Romans 13:1-7

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid,

² Jeremiah 29:7

³ Acts 5:29

because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks. Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor. (Romans 13:1-7)

Father, help us to honor You in the way that we relate to our country. Help us to be good citizens of where You've placed us, and help us to always remember that You are our King. In Jesus's name, Amen.

I should probably confess from the outset that the older I get, the more patriotic I become. And especially as we hear about the persecution that so many Christians and churches around the world experience because of the governments of the countries they're in, we ought to be truly, truly grateful to live and worship in the United States of America, and we ought to pray for our country and for our leaders, that they might honor God in the way that they serve.⁴ God bless the USA!

And when we read our passage in Romans 13 this morning, Paul seems to be saying much the same thing. And yet, we need to also read our passage this morning considering both the biblical and historical context in which Paul is writing these things. Paul wasn't writing about the USA, because the USA didn't exist 2,000 years

⁴ 1 Timothy 2:1-3

ago when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans. Instead, Paul was writing about how Christians in Rome ought to relate to their government at the time, in the 1st century AD, which was a little bit different from how our government operates here today.

For starters, the Roman government largely didn't tolerate Christians. And before you say that this sounds like our situation today, believe me, it was much worse then. Ancient Rome was much closer to what we see in North Korea or China. In many cases, Christians were persecuted or even killed because they worshiped neither the emperor nor the pagan gods of the culture.

Which makes Romans 13 that much more perplexing, because when you just read it, it seems very pro-government, doesn't it? Paul seems to say that we just ought to submit to our government, pay our taxes, and respect our leaders as coming from God. The Roman government was actively working against Christianity, and Paul wrote to the Christians to respect the authority of the government since it was put in place by God.

I think we need to hear this message today, too. We see it over and over again. When things are going our way, we praise our nation. We praise our leaders. We thank God for them. But as soon as a politician says or does something that we disagree with, especially if they belong to the other political party, whichever that is, all of a sudden we call them all sorts of names that God tells us not to call people.

Is that honoring Jesus as King?

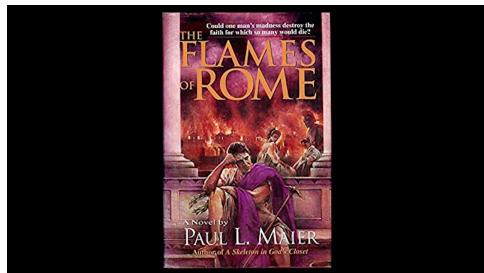
If you look at the previous passage in Romans 12, you find that Paul was talking about how to conquer evil. And the biblical answer to that, as we saw last week, is to overcome evil with good.⁵

But if you look at the lives of a lot of Christians today, you might get the impression that the best way to overcome evil is to legislate morality. But in Paul's day, the opposite was taking place. The Roman government was hostile toward Christians. Christians were seen as a threat, and the Roman government saw that Christianity was spreading fast, and they wanted to stop this movement before they overthrew the government.

Now, Christians weren't seeking to overthrow the Roman government, because they were more concerned with evangelism than with politics, and yet, that didn't stop the Roman government from trying to stop Christians before they started.

This book has been on my need-to-read list for a while now, and I encourage you to read it also.

[Image of The Flames of Rome]



The Flames of Rome describes just how bad it was for Christians during the first century in the Roman Empire. Christians were being

⁵ Romans 12:21

hunted down and killed, not just by unbelieving Jews, but by a government who was trying to preserve itself at the expense of the lives of God's people. The government was attempting to overcome good with evil, while God tells us to overcome evil with good.

Towards the end of His life, people urged Jesus to overthrow the Roman government. Jesus had amassed a great following, and they assumed that he would save them not in a spiritual way, but in a physical way. They wanted Him as their king, but not as King over their hearts, just over their country. But Jesus refused. And instead, Jesus went to the cross. Instead of seeking to conquer evil through an insurrection, Jesus conquered evil through sacrificing Himself in our place.⁶

And it was in that context that Paul wrote Romans 13. Look at verses 1 and 2.

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. (Romans 13:1-2)

While a lot of believers may have wanted to storm the capital, Paul cautioned them to submit. While we might want to force our morality on others, the Bible instructs us to pray for those in authority over us so that we might live peaceful and quiet lives,⁷

⁶ Matthew 21:9, Matthew 22:20-21, Matthew 27:20-23

⁷ 1 Timothy 2:2

and even to allow ourselves to be crucified,⁸ even while our nation and world are against everything we believe in.

As long as the laws enacted on us don't cause us to sin, we're to submit. We're to follow our nations' laws. That's why you ought to obey the speed limit, and wear your seatbelt, and vote. Our government tells us to do these things, and it's even to our benefit to do these things, and we generally have no moral reason not to do them. So we ought to submit to our governing authorities, and do them, and even see them as from God.

Now, I'm sure Paul recognized that the Roman government was not ideal. I'm sure he was aware of unjust laws. And yet, he wrote that the government was instituted by God. Because, in truth, God is the only authority. God is ruler of all,⁹ and every other authority in our lives is only in that position because God ordained that it would be so. Your boss only has authority over you because God placed them in authority over you. Your teachers only have authority over you because God placed them as authority figures in your lives. And the same is true of our government officials and laws. So to oppose the government when it gives us laws that don't contradict God's law is to bring judgment—God's judgment—on ourselves.

Verse 3.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God's servant for your

⁸ Matthew 16:24-26

⁹ Psalm 97:1

good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. (Romans 13:3-4)

Now this is interesting, because as we already said, the Roman government at the time was actively against Christians. And yet, Paul wrote to the Roman Christians that they didn't have to be afraid of the government as long as they did what was good. It's almost like Paul wasn't concerned all that much about persecution as long as he was being persecuted for the sake of Christ.

Suffering for doing good is an honor. Suffering for serving God is a blessing.¹⁰ Paul wasn't concerned about that.

But what Paul was concerned about was that the Romans Christians wouldn't suffer for doing good, but would suffer for doing evil. He was concerned that they would take Rome up on their suspicions and become exactly who they weren't: people who sought to win through political gains or political rebellion.

Here's the thing. There is evil in the world,¹¹ but it doesn't do any good to just complain about the evil that's in the world. And it doesn't benefit Christ that we would seek to overcome evil with evil. But we can be a shining example to the world of contentment and love even as we're persecuted for our faith.¹² And that's what Paul was encouraging. Don't overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:14

¹¹ Isaiah 5:20, Romans 5:12, 1 John 2:15

¹² Matthew 5:16

Because if we do evil, there is judgment. There are consequences. Practically speaking, that can mean fines, or jail, or even death. God has given governments that authority. And that's only an illustration of God's wrath toward sin. There are real consequences for sin.

Sometimes those consequences are very natural. If you drink and drive, you might get into a car accident. If you eat too much, it can increase your risk of having a heart attack. But other consequences can be imposed on us. If you drink and drive, even if you don't get into a car accident, you could still get your license suspended. You could still go to jail.

And our sin before God is the same way. Sometimes there are natural consequences to our sin, like how our prayers are hindered,¹³ or how we can experience mental and spiritual turmoil.¹⁴ If you don't obey or trust in Jesus, who truly is King, these kinds of natural consequences just make sense. If we rebel against Jesus, we will experience judgment.¹⁵

And as we've seen several times in Paul's letter to the Romans, we've all rebelled against Jesus, the King. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,¹⁶ and the wages of sin is death.¹⁷ That's the natural consequence of our sin.

¹³ Psalm 66:18

¹⁴ Philippians 4:6

¹⁵ Revelation 21:8

¹⁶ Romans 3:23

¹⁷ Romans 6:23

But then God, out of the richness of His mercy,¹⁸ also disciplines those that He loves,¹⁹ so that even when we don't experience a natural consequence, we will still experience His wrath, and hell, not because He doesn't love us, but so that we would clearly see what our sin does to us.²⁰

Verse 5.

Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks. Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor. (Romans 13:5-7)

So, once again, Paul commands us to obey the government when we don't have a biblical reason not to. Despite the common saying today, taxation is not theft. The speed limit is not a suggestion. And we're not given the choice of respecting some of our government officials while slandering others. Paul commands us to respect them as coming from God Himself.

Now, we have a different government structure today than Paul did. We have a vote. We can change our government. And yet, even still, this world is not our home.²¹ We're to be in the world, but not of it.²² Our goal ought not to be to get our government to unite church

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:4-8

¹⁹ Hebrews 12:6

²⁰ Matthew 10:28

²¹ Philippians 3:20

²² John 17:14-15

and state. That's what happened under Constantine, and the Roman Catholic Church was born. And we can't force the world to act more Christlike. That's what Christians did during the Crusades, and hundreds of thousands of unbelievers were killed.²³

As Christians, our primary devotion ought not to be to our country, but to God. A biblical view of God and country is simply to love and serve the people that God's placed around us,²⁴ which often aligns with loving and serving the people of our country, as we love and serve God. But serving our country is not an end in and of itself. Our highest priority as Christians isn't to serve our country, but to serve the Lord, as it says in 1 Corinthians 10:31.

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Now, that might rub some Christians today the wrong way. But if that's you, once again, ask yourself, "Who is your king?" When we start giving our nation the place that only Jesus should have in our lives, that's when we start falling into some of these errors we've seen in history. Things like merging church and state, and using the power of the government to force people to become Christians. But that's not the way of Christ!

Jesus didn't come so that we would have political victories. He came to save you, and to save your neighbor. He came to seek and to save the lost.²⁵ Maybe you look at your neighbor and think, "Man, that guy's lost. He has no idea what's going on. What an idiot!"

²³ Possibly millions. <https://apholt.com/2019/01/30/death-estimates-for-the-crusades/>

²⁴ Matthew 22:36-40

²⁵ Luke 19:10

Jesus came to save him. And Jesus came to give you both peace and joy no matter what's going on in the world.²⁶

And believe me, the world is messed up! And I'm grateful for a nation in which we have religious freedom. But don't put your hope in our nation. Put your hope in God. It's the gospel of Jesus Christ that's good news for all nations.²⁷ It's not the USA, or democracy, or capitalism. It's Jesus.

Jesus is the King, and His Kingdom has no end.²⁸ His Kingdom is full of life and joy. Salvation doesn't come through getting the right people in office, or getting the right laws passed through Congress. Salvation comes through Jesus, who died on the cross for your sin.²⁹ Make Him your Savior and the King of your heart, and you'll have eternal life.³⁰

²⁶ John 16:33

²⁷ Luke 2:10, Romans 1:5

²⁸ Isaiah 9:7, Luke 1:33

²⁹ 1 John 1:9

³⁰ John 17:3