

ROMANS 13 VERSES 1 - 7 - SUNDAY 3RD JUNE 2012.

Imagine you are in a state where the government had made atheism the guiding factor in everything - "God is dead" is the mantra of the authorities and to practice religion in any form is against the law. It is illegal to meet together to worship any kind of god - if you do so and are caught you face a lengthy prison sentence - or even death. Do you still seek to meet up with other believers to praise, pray and read the scriptures?

Imagine you are living in a big city - like London - where there is democracy and freedom of all kinds of speech and religion. It is proposed that the congestion zone is increased by a further mile. This impacts you - for you drive your young children to a school which is just inside the zone. This makes you angry - it seems just another tax by stealth and unfair. A group of neighbours start a campaign to protest against the proposal. You go along to a meeting and some there are some in favour of civil disobedience if the charge goes ahead. What is your view of this action?

We will come back to these two very different scenarios at the end after considering our passage today. It is part of our series focusing upon Romans Chapters 12 - 15 under the title "The pursuit of Holiness" - and today we are thinking about what Paul has to teach about how we should respond to the governing authorities. We will be asking, too, if our attitude to the governing authorities has anything to do with our worship.

READ PASSAGE - ROMANS 13 VERSES 1 - 7.

Need to say at the outset that these verses are not everything the Bible has to say about how we respond to governing authorities and neither are these verses an in depth political theory. The context is very important - these verses are written to a specific group of Christians in a specific time and place - in this case Rome in the 1st Century - who are facing a specific set of challenges.

Also Romans Chapter 7 verses 1 - 7 do not appear out of nowhere!

Paul is not taking a break from his main theme of Chapters 12 - 15 which is what true worship of the living God should look like - and we have already established that nothing lies outside of the boundaries of worship.

Last week we looked at the end of chapter 12 where Paul tells us how we are to react to a world that is hostile to our belief and faith - let me read verses 17 - 21 as a reminder and to get the flow of Pauls thinking.

Read verses 17 - 21.

In response to this teaching the Christians in Rome were asking this:

" How are we to relate to an empire that does not relate to Jesus as Lord - and to an emperor who is proclaimed as Lord. How do we worship God in light of this?

Paul teaches how we relate to the governing authorities in this context - and as we consider what he says remember the overall theme of this whole section is "this is your act of worship".

Now, when I mention the phrase “the state” here I am thinking of the governing authorities – it may mean something different to you but this my meaning of it here. In verses 1 and 5 Paul gives the basic principle as to how followers of Jesus Christ should respond – read verses 1, 5 again.

We are told we are to submit to the authorities – the words “submit” here means to place ourselves voluntarily and willingly under the existing authorities.

We generally do that all the time do we not?

Here is an example.

Later on today I am catching a train to Dover where I am going to a wedding tomorrow. I intend to buy a ticket before boarding. When I am on the train I will show that ticket to the ticket officer when he asks to see it – I will do that willingly and voluntarily. I will not know who the person is, what he or she believes, the moral quality of their lives – what I do know is that they have authority on that train – and if he asks me to do something like move to another carriage I will have to listen and submit – for he carries authority in that setting and domain. So when Paul tells us to submit to the governing authorities it is not some strange 1st Century idea – we experience this in lots of ways every day do we not? Is that not the reason that if you are a cyclist you never go through red lights? But it does seem a bold, stark, uncompromising command in verses 1 and 2 – let everyone be subject to the governing authorities – if you rebel against these authorities you are rebelling what God has instituted.

Understand the context Paul was writing in and it is even starker.

The Roman Christians were not living in an easy going, democracy loving, liberal society like we do. This is the first century of the Roman Empire and at this point was ruled by the notorious emperor Nero. Nero’s early years were not as bad as the later ones – when he brutally persecuted the Christians – but from the outset the system he ran was full of injustice and imperial arrogance.

Yet – says Paul – let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

Rebellion – Revolution and Civil disobedience are not to be the normal Christian stance. The normal attitude is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. Think of what has just gone before at the end of chapter 12.

Paul has declared strongly and repeatedly that private vengeance is absolutely forbidden for Christians. But, that does not mean, on the one hand, that God does not care about evil – or on the other – that God wants society to collapse into a chaos where the bullies and power abuses go unchallenged and get away with it. No – that is not God’s will and plan.

As those who are made in the image of God – do we not all want to live as human beings in an ordered, just, properly functioning society.

Romans 13 tell us that authorities are put in place because God wants the world to be ordered – not chaotic. Some government is always necessary in a world where evil

flourishes when left unchecked. This is maybe not the only reason Paul writes this to the early Christians. The Christians were already regarded as the scum of the earth - Paul says:

“we don't want to get a reputation as trouble makers.”

Paul is anxious precisely because he believes that Jesus is the one true Lord of all and it is not wise for his followers to pick unnecessary quarrels with lesser Lords! The Christian Community was meant to be a revolutionary community - but not of violent revolution! The teaching of Jesus - and the writers of the epistles point to a revolution not involving violence - but of Love and Grace.

Now, I do realise that in certain situations - this teaching in Romans 13 does present us with real challenges and deeply difficult decisions to make.

History teaches us that these verses have been used and abused by those in power as a way to tell their subjects to keep silent and offer no resistance - even in the face of flagrant abuse.

That can't be right, can it?

Let's go back 150 years to someone who was very critical - very angry in fact - at what the Apostle Paul wrote here.

He was a German Jew living in London - and as he read this passage - stroking his beard - he mused and wrote his response:

“ Religion is nothing but the opium of the masses” - and he cleverly - and with conviction - put forward the idea that religion was one means the powerful used to oppress and control the powerless (who am I talking about?)

As Karl Marx wrote his communist manifesto he highlights this part in Romans 13 and says:

“Can't you see that I am right - can't you see the Christian world view encourages a passivity that means the corrupt status quo goes unchallenged - it is just a means of control - and prevents the masses raising their voices in protest.”

He obviously had enormous influence.

Maybe that is you now - you read this and you say to yourself:

“Doesn't that just mean the powerful just get their own way - isn't the Bible against that”.

I would argue that Paul in these 8 verses is not supporting a passive acceptance of whatever governing authorities advocate and carry out.

Why do I say that?

Well, we need to consider Pauls basic reasons for his writing these words.

There, as far as I can see, two reasons.

The first is that we are to be subject to governing authorities because they are instituted by God. Paul radically claims that there is a higher authority than the governing

authorities. Basically all human authorities owe their authority to God – and to resist authorities - in normal circumstances - is to resist God Himself – which, of course, is futile.

We submit to the authorities not because they have absolute control in the universe - or are perfect and without any flaws - no - rather we submit as an expression of the fact we worship a God whose ultimate authority stands behind the governing authority.

Secondly- and this is from verses 3, 4- authorities are God's servants to do what?

It is to reward good and to punish evil.

If you do good – you will gain approval.

If you do wrong – you should be afraid – why?

For the governing authorities carry power to punish wrong – and they have been giving authority to carry it out as God's agent.

That is a general principle - is it not?

I think we should give thanks that we live in a country where if we are law abiding we are generally safe, secure and protected.

If someone is not law abiding – they should, rightfully, expect to be punished if they are caught. That is a good thing is it not?

Yes?

What Paul is saying when he writes to the Romans is that – even in the most dictatorial states – if the principle that good is rewarded, and evil is punished holds true - then we are to submit to the authorities.

But Paul is a realist. Of course he knows that some authorities do not honour good and do not punish evil. There are cases where it – desperately – is the other way around – the authorities themselves carry out evil – and they punish those that do good, righteous acts.

You may be able to think of examples of this.

The most graphic from the last century in Western Europe was Nazi Germany.

Think of the way the authorities at that time and place treated the Jews.

To hand over Jewish people in order to send them to the evil labour camps was an action that was encouraged and rewarded.

To hide, and seek to protect, Jews from this terrible fate was an action that was punished very severely – even by death.

Do we apply Romans 13 to this situation?

Was it right to submit to the authorities in this manner?

I don't think so – I will give reasons, and an example, very shortly.

But let's be aware of what history teaches us. Where there are authorities - where evil is rewarded and good is punished – it is inevitable that they will implode from within and collapse. That is what happened in Nazi Germany, which is what happened to Pol Pot in Cambodia, which is what happened – eventually - to communism in the Soviet Bloc.

So, what do we do, as Christians, when we live in a state where evil is rewarded and good is punished?

We should argue, we should protest, we should refuse to do the evil being imposed - Why?

It is because, ultimately, we are answerable to a higher authority.

Let me give you an example.

Have you heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

He was a remarkable man. He grew up in Germany and became a very fine theological teacher and an incredibly brave Pastor. He was ministering in Germany in the 1930's during the rise of the Nazi party.

He constantly and relentlessly spoke out against its beliefs and practices - particularly how the party viewed and treated the Jewish population.

Bonhoeffer spoke out long before the death camps came into being.

He formed what was known as "The Confessing Church" in Germany because it troubled him so much that the established Church was swept along and manipulated by the Nazi's. The confessing Church effectively proclaimed publically: "this is wrong - we cannot stand back and watch this happen".

As the power of the Nazi party grew so did its evil grip and the broadness of its paranoia and persecution - Bonhoeffer was forced to flee to England where he pastored two German Churches in the West end of London.

But he was convicted to go back to Germany to stand with other German believers - even though he knew it could cost his life if he continued to speak out so clearly and courage sly.

He was involved, ultimately, in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler - he saw this as a lesser evil compared to what Hitler was doing to the Jews and other minorities in Germany and beyond. It failed, and he was caught and went to Rosenberg Concentration Camp where in April 1945 - a few months before Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker - he was executed by hanging.

Bonhoeffer kept his faith to the very end and it did sustain and strengthen him as he faced the ultimate test

Read section from the Bonhoeffer book - page

Remember that the state does not have total power - for its authority derives from God - and if that authority is clearly being abused and evil is rewarded and good punished - then there is a higher authority that a Christian should obey instead - whatever the cost. Paul in Romans 13 is saying that those who govern and have authority do have enormous significance - which is why we should pray for those in authority - they should not be self serving - they should protect the weak and vulnerable - they should punish evil - they should proactively encourage and reward good.

But nowhere in the New Testament are we told that it is the responsibility of the state to bring God's kingdom on earth. That is the task of the church - God's people, God's body here on earth. The state and Church are always to be distinct - they may be related in some way - but they are not meant to be one entity.

We need the state to govern properly and fairly and with justice – that is its role and purpose.

The role and purpose of the Church is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed – and while we are called to be submissive in terms of the ruling authorities – we are ultimately answerable to a higher authority

Paul finishes this section with a real life illustration of an area in which we should show we are submissive to the ruling authorities.

What does he chose?

It is whether we are paying our taxes! READ VERSE 6 AGAIN.

How seriously do you take this verse?

Or rather let me ask you this question – when was the last time you viewed paying tax as an act of worship?

Paul would see paying tax as an act of worship!

So if you have to fill in a tax form – see it as an opportunity to worship God.

Because as you pay your taxes it is helping the state to care for the poor and vulnerable, allow the state to make our lives more comfortable and enjoyable, allow the state the opportunity to punish the evil doer and reward those who do good.

Now, I am not here to make any comment on how much tax is fair or who should or shouldn't pay what – but the principle of tax paying is a way to show you are a good citizen subject to the authorities. So when we pay our taxes – we respect and honour those who have to administer it – and this is part of our worship to God.

Back to the two scenarios I started with to finish.

Can you remember them – the first was how to respond living in a state where public worship was illegal, the other was how to respond to the increased congestion charge. What to say of these cases in light of Romans 13?

The first – “In what way should I subject myself to this authority that outlaws any religious meetings?

I will continue to pay taxes, keep the laws, and as far as I am able I will be a good citizen. However – I am ultimately under the higher authority of God.

It is important for me to meet with other Christians – indeed I am told to regularly do so in the New Testament. It is vital for a healthy spiritual life to meet with other believers to praise God – to pray – to read God's word – to share and encourage.

Therefore, in this area – I am at liberty not to be submissive to the ruling authorities.

There are plenty of examples in the scriptures where believers choose to worship God though against the law – the book of Daniel is a fine example. Now, I may choose to do it secretly to avoid detection – or do it publically as millions have done through the history of the Church and accept the consequences.

What about the congestion charge issue?

Well, the way our system works is through a process of consultation – and protest has an important part to play in this system. It allows all sides of the discussion to be heard before a decision is reached – and protesting is valid if you strongly disagree.

But, once a decision is reached and the charge imposed – it should be paid as an expression of subjection to the governing authorities.

You can continue to disagree and protest – you can speak out in every way possible – but I would say civil disobedience is ruled out for those whose ultimate authority is the God of scripture.

You may disagree – happy to discuss.

There is much to think upon – so do talk about these things.

But after considering this part of Romans 13 – I hope you can see Paul would strongly disagree with Karl Marx. Religion – or Christian belief and practice – is not meant to be the opium of the masses!

Paul encourages a positive view of the state – but one that never descends into unquestioning or absolute allegiance. It allows us to worship and serve God in the real world – and tells us to declare that Jesus is Lord- even when in doing so it generates opposition, persecution and hostility.

Whatever the cost and consequence, to proclaim and live this declaration is our calling above everything else.