

ESSENTIAL REMINDERS ABOUT THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT
ROMANS 13:1-7

Robert Wilson, in his book *Character Above All* seeks to answer one fundamental question: “What is the relationship between the President’s character and presidential leadership?” He asks the question because it is his observation that as a group, the American people “started out such good people. What happened to us?’ ...Our political process does reflect us, as do our politicians. If we pay only superficial, limited attention to that process, why should we expect any more than we have, to be better off than we are?” So begins his examinations of the ten presidents from FDR through George H. W. Bush.

It is the tenet of Wilson that the worth of these ten influential men was not so much what they accomplished through their political agenda, but what their activities in the highest office in the land revealed about their character. While the book is not even nominally Christian, its thesis is essentially biblical. When the early church went to choose its first group of servant leaders (called deacons), the qualifications were for men who were “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom...” (Acts 6:3). Do you ever wonder if someone is worthy of being followed? That’s the test. It’s a test that is fitting for spiritual leaders and it’s a test for those who will lead us secularly — and in particular, in government.

I am not prone to preaching “political” sermons. Apart from my regular expositional preaching that has occasionally addressed the topic of the government, I could only find two sermons I’ve preached about government and politics. But it seems good to me as we head to the conclusion of a very unusual election cycle to think about government and faith and in particular how we need to be thinking about the election this year. So over the next few weeks, I want to address a number of essential truths about the election:

- ✓ Essential Reminders About the Role of Government (Romans 13:1-7)
- ✓ Essential Reminders About Responding to Government (Romans 13:1-7)
- ✓ Essential Attitudes Prior to the Election (Selected Scriptures)
- ✓ The Essential Issue in the Election (Daniel 4)
- ✓ Essential Actions After the Election (Selected Scriptures)

We will begin this week by looking at the responsibility of the government and the kind of character that is necessary for a governmental official to lead well. What should we expect from our leaders? What does God expect from our leaders? Here is the theme of the message this morning:

EVERY GOVERNMENT IS ESTABLISHED BY GOD TO CARRY OUT HIS PURPOSES.

In these verses, Paul affirms three realities about the position and role of government and leaders:

1. All Government is God's Government (vv. 1, 4)

- ✓ God has established EVERY government (v. 1)
- ✓ Every government is GOD'S servant (v. 4)

2. What Governments are to Do (vv. 3-6)

- ✓ Government RESTRAINS Evil (v. 3a)
- ✓ Government PROMOTES GOOD (v. 3b)
- ✓ Government is GOD'S Temporal Avenger of Evil (v. 4)
- ✓ Government TAXES for the benefit of the people (v. 6)

3. What Governmental Leaders are to Be

- ✓ Leaders Should Not be EVIL (v. 3a)
- ✓ Leaders Should be GOOD (v. 3b)
- ✓ Leaders Should be SERVANTS (v. 4)

As we move into this section, it's also significant to note that Romans 13 is in a different major section of the book of Romans from what we've been studying. In its broadest categories, Romans can be divided into two sections — theology, particularly of salvation (chs. 1-11), and application of the theology (chs. 12-16). And 12:1-2 serves as something of a thesis statement for the application section. And this section on government follows that declaration — when Paul talks about a transformed life, he is not talking about generalities, but he is talking about very real circumstances in which we live day-by-day. And our relationship to the government is one of those realities. And if we look closer at the end of chapter 12, we see that sometimes believers suffer unjustly from enemies; and isn't it interesting that the next thing Paul addresses is the government? Sometimes our unjust suffering comes from the hands of the government. How should we think about that government, and how should we relate to that government? Let's look at the first of those two questions today: What is the government's role and what does God expect of government and its leaders?

1. All Government is God's Government (vv. 1, 4)

- God has established EVERY government (v. 1)

- ✓ In verse 1, Paul speaks with remarkable clarity and precision: **every person...no authority...those which exist**. None of those statements allow for exceptions. They are all-inclusive.
- ✓ What is of particular interest this morning are the last two:
 - **There is no authority except from God** = This means that God is sovereign over both governments and governors (entities and individuals). There is no one who is in authority and there is no government in authority except that God has given it that authority.
 - From our perspective, it appears that governments and leaders gain their authority through popular elections or appointments or through force or heredity. But the "transformed" and renewed mind understands that "behind every such process [is] the hand of God." [Moo]
 - This is repeatedly taught and affirmed in Scripture: Daniel 2:21, 37-38; 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21.

- *Jer. 27:5-6 "I have made the earth, the men and the beasts which are on the face of the earth by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and I will give it to the one who is pleasing in My sight. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the wild animals of the field to serve him."*
- *2 Sam. 12:8 (the Lord to David) "I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these!"*
- *2 Chr. 20:6 (Jehoshaphat) "O LORD, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You."*

- And as if that is not enough, Paul also says, **those which exist are established by God**. Paul tells the Romans that every current form of government (including Rome) has its origin in God. God has assigned and appointed every government at every time in history. He has set them in place and they continue to have their position in time and place through His sustaining hand.
- This does not necessarily mean that all governments are "God blessed," but it does mean that just as God sovereignly placed Nebuchadnezzar into leadership for particular purposes, so He places every government and ruler in every place to accomplish His purposes.
- ✓ This is of *great* comfort to the believer, because there are wicked and evil and foolish and selfish governments. And we know that they are there by the decree and purpose of God. No government or ruler is ruling accidentally. They have all been placed there by God for that time for His purpose.

- Every government is **GOD'S** servant (v. 4)

- ✓ Two times in v. 4 and once in v. 6, Paul says that governments and rulers are “ministers” and “servants” of God (the two terms are essentially synonymous).
- ✓ Let’s make a couple of observations about what Paul says in verse four:
 - The first word in the Gk. sentence is **of God** — it’s Paul’s way of emphasizing that government belongs to God and no one else; the government and leader is put in that place not to do his own bidding but to do the bidding and task of the Lord.
 - It also calls him a **minister** and **servant** — the word is often used of a waiter at a table; his task is simple and lowly. And Paul notes that service is **to you**. The government and ruler both exist to serve the people of that nation; they do not serve themselves and exalt themselves. And Paul uses the singular pronoun **you** (not “y’all”) — so the sense is that they are to serve the people of the nation individually. They are to be personally involved with their people.
- ✓ Whether they realize it or not and whether they acknowledge it or not, every ruler in every government is God’s servant, doing God’s work and accomplishing God’s purposes.
- ✓ That doesn’t mean that every government everywhere is righteous. We know they are not. But they are governments, and no matter how unrighteous, there is still some rule and authority and that is better than no government and open anarchy (remember *Lord of the Flies*?).
- ✓ And it does mean that whatever they do is within the plan and purpose of God — sometimes for blessing (as often with the nation of Israel), and sometimes for judgment (Rom. 1:24ff).
- ✓ Jerry Bridges was exactly right when he wrote:

“The so-called sovereign nations of the world are not truly sovereign. They are nothing more than instruments in the hand of God to accomplish His will: sometimes to protect His people, sometimes to open doors for advancement of the gospel, and sometimes to be His instrument of judgment against ungodliness. As God looks down upon the nations that accomplish His purpose, even while rebelling against Him, He sees them as nothing more than His instruments.” [*Trusting God*, 89.]

2. What Governments are to Do (vv. 3-6)

- Government **RESTRAINS** Evil (v. 3a)

- ✓ One of the primary roles of the government is to restrain evil, as Paul notes in v. 3 — **rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil**. That is, governments are designed by God not to restrain good works, but evil works.
 - The phrase **good behavior** is literally, “good works.” And often this term is used in reference to the works that are done as a result of saving faith (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:21; 3:17; Tt. 1:16; 3:1).
 - So under government as God has designed it, no man should ever be fearful of doing something that is good and righteous. If he is gracious, kind, submissive, honorable, he should never have to fear that the government will do something against him.

- ✓ But if he is evil, that is different. When Paul says, **but for evil**, he means that rulers *are* a cause for fear when people do things that are evil.
 - When people do things that are immoral and socially reprehensible, they *should be* terrified of the actions of the government against them.
 - When people talk about laws and consequences and prison, they often will say, “it’s not a deterrent and it’s not supposed to be.” Yes, it is. And if it isn’t a deterrent, then the law obviously is not strong enough; it *should* create fear in people when they are lawbreakers.
 - Why is this important? Because a society can’t survive if there are no restraints. If murder and rape and fraud and theft and dishonesty are left unchecked, anarchy will rule and the culture will implode. Just this week I read H. G. Wells’ book *The Invisible Man*. It is considered a science fiction classic — “what if men could become invisible?” But I found it far more interesting as a social experiment — “what will men do if they are invisible and think they can act with impunity?” They will steal and pillage and destroy and kill and the culture will be destroyed.
 - If government is immoral, then every man will do what is right in his own eyes, and the culture will be destroyed (e.g., Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). “If there is no governmental authority to stop evil people, evil simply increases.” [Grudem, 78]
 - And even when governments are imperfect — even grossly imperfect — there is virtually always still some measure and base standard of morality that is protected that is for the good of the people — and that’s the way God designed it.
- ✓ So the government is given to the people to restrain evil. But the government also...

• **Government PROMOTES GOOD (v. 3b)**

- ✓ Paul takes the same principle from the beginning of v. 3 and then states it in a positive: ***Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise...***
- ✓ This gives us a further requirement of the government. It is designed to promote and reward things that are right and good.
- ✓ The praise offered by the government is an affirmation, admiration, approval, and recognition of the kinds of things that are consistent with moral goodness and godliness.
- ✓ Government should not be opposed to righteous actions, but it should affirm those things that are consistent with truth and righteousness as revealed in Scripture.
- ✓ Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 2:13-14. Governments are designed to affirm the moral choices and actions of the people.
- ✓ One implication of this is not only that government should “reward” obedience, but that government should establish laws and practices that make it conducive for people to do good. So Wayne Grudem suggests things like tax-supported playgrounds and parks and tax-free status for churches and supporting and encouraging marriage through legal privileges and economic benefits. [Politics, 80.]
- ✓ Another way government promotes good is that it defends the weak and defenseless (Ps. 82:2-4).

- Rulers judge with fairness (according to the Law) and without partiality
- Rulers pay special attention to those who cannot defend themselves, using their power to stop the wicked from harming others (cf. also **Dan. 4:27**).
- ✓ So government restrains evil and promotes good. And it is also...

- Government is GOD'S Temporal Avenger of Evil (v. 4)

- ✓ If one does evil, the government is God's **avenger**. It is one that punishes. And Paul is graphic here — **it bears the sword**. What was the sword used to do? To kill. Today we might say, "it bears the pistol and the electric chair (or lethal syringe)." The government is given the responsibility of protecting people to the point of using deadly force against evil.
- ✓ The point is that there is to be just retribution against gross evil and violence. Capital punishment and lethal force are proscribed by Scripture for use by the government.
- ✓ Notice also the connection between this statement and Romans 12:19-21 —
 - There Paul says, **never take revenge, but leave room for the wrath of God**. When suffering evil and injustice, the believer is never to take matters into his own hands vengefully because he can rest in the truth that God will take care of the injustice.
 - And here in 13:4 the government is given the right to be the **avenger** of injustice. In other words, one way that the Lord takes care of injustice is by mediating His wrath through the just actions of the government against evil and sin. When the government avenges evil, it is not an eternal act, but it is a temporal act that reminds us that God has not forgotten what is right. He will take care both here (generally) and in eternity (always) those things that are unrighteous.
- ✓ When Scripture says this, it is also affirming that a fundamental role of government *is* to punish sin. Cf. Gen. 9:6 — a universal principle (before the institution of the Mosaic Law or the creation of the nation of Israel). If there is no punishment of evil, there is no fear, and if there is no fear, then evil flourishes. It is to the benefit of the people when the government avenges evil. And when it refuses or is restricted from avenging evil, then chaos will ultimately win the day.

"What must not be lost sight of is that, unpleasant as is the task of the jailor and the use of the whip, the cell, the noose, the guillotine, these things stand behind the stability of civilized society, and they stand there necessarily, for God has declared it so, in harmony with reality, rather than with apostate sociological opinion. Government, with its coercive powers, is a social necessity, but one determined by the Creator, not by the statistical tables of some university social research staff!" [Robert Culver, in MacArthur, *Romans 9-16*, 226.]

- Government TAXES for the benefit of the people (v. 6)

- ✓ Here is a truth that most of us don't like, but it is clearly in the text — **you pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God...** Taxes aren't just a manmade system — they are a God-ordained system so that officials have the resources they need to carry out their responsibilities of restraining evil and promoting good. They have **devoted themselves to this very thing** — it's their responsibility to collect.

- ✓ We will address this in more detail next time, but let's emphasize at least one truth: the taxes are not for the selfish consumption of the rulers, but they are for restraining evil and promoting good.
- ✓ As John Calvin said, "[rulers] should remember that all that they receive from the people is public property, and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury."

3. What Governmental Leaders are to Be

- In a recent pair of sermons, John MacArthur identified ten characteristics that governmental leaders should possess.

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| ✓ Worship | ✓ Honesty | ✓ Security |
| ✓ Righteousness | ✓ Morality | ✓ Courage |
| ✓ Justice | ✓ Humility | |
| ✓ Wisdom | ✓ Teachability | |
- ✓ I agree with his list, but want to confine our attention to this passage and draw implications from what we've just seen about governments to identify three character traits all leaders should possess (they are non-negotiable):

• Leaders Should Not be EVIL (v. 3a)

- ✓ If the rulers of nations are given to make laws against evil and support and enforce those laws, then it also follows that they themselves should follow and obey those laws. They are not above the law, but they are to submit and conform to the law as any other citizen does. Wayne Grudem is right when he summarizes, "In a nation with good government, the law rules over the rulers, not the rulers over the law." [*Politics According to the Bible*, 103-4.]
- ✓ The character of the ruler is to be against evil.
- ✓ A number of years ago, historian Paul Johnson wrote a book entitled, *The Intellectuals*. His quest was to examine "the moral and judgmental credentials of certain leading intellectuals to give advice to humanity on how to conduct its affairs." In other words, men like Rousseau, Marx, Tolstoy, Bertrand Russell, and others have attempted to shape the way humanity thinks — are they even consistent with their own morality? After more than 300 pages of analysis, he concludes this:

"The belief seems to be spreading that intellectuals are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old. I share that skepticism. A dozen people picked at random on the street are at least as likely to offer sensible views on moral and political matters as a cross-section of the intelligentsia. But I will go further....Not merely should they be kept well-away from power, they should also be objects of particular suspicion when they seek to offer collective advice." [342]

- ✓ And the primary reason he says that is because time after time in his examination of their lives he found that they did not do what they said. They ignored their own laws, principles, and counsel. And that made them illegitimate leaders.

- ✓ And the same is true of our governmental leaders. One-by-one we must evaluate: do they affirm the law by the way they live or do they deny the law by the way they live? Too many of our leaders and potential leaders fall under the critique of Romans 1:32 — “they not only do the same (evil), but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” Instead of being law-supporters, and law-keepers, they are law-breakers and they celebrate the breaking of law. Those are illegitimate leaders no matter their name and no matter their party.

- **Leaders Should be GOOD (v. 3b)**

- ✓ If governments and leaders are called to promote things that are morally good, then it is appropriate to ask, “Is the character of his/her life good?” Do they not only affirm the truth and what is moral, but do they actually *do* the things that are good?
- ✓ The text is not suggesting that these leaders have to be believers in Christ, but it does say that they must affirm and practice a basic and common morality.
- ✓ One place you can see this is just in the way that they talk — are they kind? gracious? helpful? polite? understanding? Do they have good manners? Are they respectful? Are they faithful to their spouses (cf. Prov. 31:3)? Are they under control and sober-minded (Prov. 31:4-5)? Do they care for the needs of the unfortunate and incapable (Prov. 31:8)? Do they defend the needy (Prov. 31:9)?
- ✓ Am I placing too much emphasis on things that seem trivial? No, because as Jesus said, the words of a man reveal his heart (Lk. 6:45). A man who lacks loving and gracious words lacks a loving and gracious heart and reveals his lack of love for others — his opponent, the political process, and the people he desires to govern. And even more, it reveals a heart filled with self-love. So the question is, “can an impolite, self-loving, people-despising person make a godly, loving ruler?” The answer is self-evident.
- ✓ To this we might also add Jesus’ principle about faithfulness: “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much” (Lk. 16:10). In this instance, the little thing is politeness, kindness, openness to discussion, refrain from bullying, and gentleness. It doesn’t take much to do those things. We train our children to talk politely to adults — even a three-year-old can say “yes, ma’am” and “no, sir.” It’s a small thing. And if a political candidate and public figure repeatedly shows a propensity for rudeness and crudeness, it is revealing that he cannot be entrusted with the bigger responsibilities of rulership. He has failed the test of faithfulness in small things; he cannot be trusted to be faithful in the great things.

- Leaders Should be SERVANTS (v. 4)

- ✓ How often do you hear the words “politician” and “servant” in the same sentence? They don’t often go together. But they do in God’s economy.
- ✓ The leader leads not for the privilege of lording his position over others; he leads so that he can serve and care for others. Three times in vv. 4, 6 Paul says that they are servants and ministers.
- ✓ The point of these verses is clear: “you aren’t God — and you have no authority except that which is derived and given from God, and your task is to serve God (not yourself).”
- ✓ So we do well to ask, “does this individual love to serve others or is he/she wanting service?”
- ✓ I like what Leon Morris says about this principle:

“The Emperor on his throne, and for that matter any petty bureaucrat, might well see his power as something to be exercised as he chose. But Paul is clear that everyone in any position of responsibility is first and foremost God’s servant and that it is to God that he will one day be forced to render account.” [Romans, 464.]

- ✓ And of course, if someone is going to be a servant, he needs to be humble. Of all the things that are said about Moses, and his leadership perhaps the most significant is, “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3).
- ✓ Consider some of these verses from Proverbs:

- *Prov. 11:2 When pride comes, then comes dishonor, But with the humble is wisdom.*
- *15:25 The LORD will tear down the house of the proud, But He will establish the boundary of the widow.*
- *15:33 The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom, And before honor comes humility.*
- *16:5 Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.*
- *16:19 It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly Than to divide the spoil with the proud.*
- *18:12 Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, But humility goes before honor.*
- *21:4 Haughty eyes and a proud heart, The lamp of the wicked, is sin.*
- *29:23 A man’s pride will bring him low, But a humble spirit will obtain honor.*

- ✓ Did you notice how many times it said that humility comes before honor? If you want the place of honor, then seek the place of humility — which is exactly what Jesus said (Mt. 23:6-12, esp. 11-12).
- ✓ Someone who is going to lead well at any governmental position must have the character of a humble servant. If he isn’t, he’s unqualified.

CONCLUSION: What do we do with these truths?

1. We are coming up to an election. While the Israelites and the Disciples and Jesus and Peter and Paul and all others in the biblical account didn't live in a democracy, we do. And since we do, we have a voice to say, "You are the kind of leader worth following," and "You are not the kind of leader worth following." Let these principles inform the way you vote on November 8.
2. As you have opportunity, speak to the candidates and the party leaders about these qualifications and even test and examine and confront. That's what John the Baptist did (Mt. 14:4 — speaking to Herod about stealing his brother's wife, "It is not lawful for you to have her..."). As we have opportunity to speak about the unrighteousness and unlawfulness of our leaders we must do so without fear (even as John the Baptist did not fear dying by the sword).
3. Rest. While you may not be satisfied from a human perspective about the decisions that will be made on November 8, know that on November 9, the only victors will be the ones who have been appointed by God to accomplish His purposes. And if God is satisfied with the victor, then we also should be satisfied that He is sovereignly and wisely accomplishing his purposes in our day — both for our good and His glory.

BENEDICTION: Rom. 11:33-35