

**THE CHRISTIAN AND POLITICS
RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
ROMANS 13:1-7; DANIEL 1:8-16; 3:1-18; 6:1-24; ACTS 4:18-20; 5:29
NOVEMBER 15, 2020**

The political analysis goes on and on,
 what segments of America voted what ways,
 men versus women,
 urban, suburban, and rural,
 black, white, Hispanics from Mexico, Cuba, Central and South America,
 income brackets from bottom to top,
 who has how much education,
 east coast, west coast, Midwest, southwest, the southeast.

With regard to religion what we get from the media is a focus on
 how many “evangelical Christians” are conservative Republicans and/or eager Trump supporters.
 But they don’t define “evangelical,” nor even “Christian.”
 They do not shine a spotlight on black churches that
 invite Democratic candidates to speak from their pulpits.
 Or the divide between Catholics who are traditional or progressive.
 And they certainly don’t provide any biblical reflection
 suggesting how followers of Jesus *ought* to relate to governmental authorities.
 So today, I’m going to do a bit of what the media does not do,
 Let’s dig into the big, overall question of how a follower of Jesus ought to relate to
 the governing authorities.

The first part of the book of Romans is theology, focused on seeing reality through God’s eyes.

 In chapters 1-11 Paul tells us about human nature and God’s nature,
 sin and salvation,
 what God has done in and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit,
 what that means for our lives.

 Starting in chapter 12 Paul describes how we should then live our lives in the world.

 In chapter 13 he spends a few verses on the relationship of the believer to the secular government.

ROMANS 13:1-7

“Submit to the government;” obey.

BECAUSE.... Because it is “established by God.”

 Depending on what political party you affiliate with,
 you might want to disagree with that.

 But consider.... The Apostle Paul was writing as a citizen of the Roman Empire.

 Oh, he was fortunate enough to have been a citizen from birth.

 But he had no vote, no voice, no say in trying to shape or influence that government.

 He had to pay their taxes, submit to totalitarian rule,
 and experience the oppression that came upon all occupied people
 and especially all Jewish people.

 And still he wrote,

 “There is no authority except that which God has established.”

 Some people have taken this as an absolute and universal statement.

 As if to say:

 All governing authorities of all times and places
 are put in place and protected by God.

 And some governing authorities have laid claim to this passage to assert their legitimacy.

 Did Paul mean this as an absolute statement?

 It does not seem to me he would apply it to Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

 Though some preachers in the German Reformed Church during the Reich
 made just that claim using this passage of scripture.

 Would Paul have applied this to ISIS when they had their territorial caliphate?

 What about Kim Jon-Un, the Supreme Leader of North Korea?

Maybe Paul was writing during a relatively peaceful and positive time in the empire.

What would he have written when Nero had him beheaded?

I don't think Paul was glorifying the Roman Empire,
or any other particular political arrangement.

I tend to think this is a *general* statement about the place and authority of human governments.

In broad terms, human governments are under God's sovereignty.

And they have their proper function.

They are to be "God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Human authority, government, is necessary to maintain order in society,
so life can flourish.

Paul said, "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities,
not only because of possible punishment,
but also because of conscience."

Because you want to be in step with God.

Show some respect for the governing authorities.

If you can't respect the person, at least respect the office.

Because, generally speaking,
the governing authorities are what "God has established."

Does that mean I am to obey the government no matter what?

All the time and everywhere lockstep obedience?

During the Nuremburg trials after World War II

the most common defense of the Nazi war criminal was,

"I was under orders.

I was simply obeying my superiors.

I was obeying the government."

It was not a surprising answer,

given the German culture of hierarchy and regimented life,
carefully structured from the top down.

And it seems likely the defense was meant to be taken seriously.

But the ruling of the trials was that "I was under orders" is no excuse.

Generally speaking, government and law are to be obeyed.

But not 100% of the time.

If a government edict or law is immoral,

you are obligated to do what is right,

and responsible for your own actions.

For the Christian, the determination of what is "moral"

is not up to our own imaginations.

It is not determined by our political inclinations.

We're not to disobey simply because "I disagree with the policy."

Or I don't like the president in office.

Or I don't like the party in charge.

Our obedience or disobedience should be determined wholly and solely by the will of God,

God's determination of what is moral and what is immoral to do.

That is not up to us to make up as we go along.

It is for us to turn to Scripture,

to find clear teaching on moral issues,

and to find moral principles that apply to the modern situation.

And in the Bible we find stories of individuals having to make just those hard decisions,

discerning the will of God,

and disobeying human authorities,

even at great risk to themselves.

For example, Daniel was a young Jewish man taken from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon.

It's important to note, Daniel and his friends did not take up the cause of "the resistance"

simply because it was an oppressive government,

or just because they didn't like King Nebuchadnezzar.

Those things were certainly true.

But that did not give them license to go starting trouble.
 They were, in fact, model captives living in exile.
 So much so that Daniel and his friends were drafted into the service of the king of Babylon.
 They were to spend three years in training,
 so they could become advisors to the king.
 That training meant every detail of their lives was prescribed for them,
 including their diet.
 But the prescribed diet included a variety of foods that good Jews would not eat;
 bacon, pork chops, shrimp, escargot, catfish, a bloody rare steak, and such.
 You and I might get along well with it.
 But for Daniel and his friends... those things were not kosher.
 God's food laws prescribed for them a different culture,
 distinct from the surrounding peoples.
 Rather than just give in because their situation was one of powerlessness,
 and it might have seemed prudent to just get along to go alone,
 Daniel stood his ground.
 Not because he didn't like the Babylonian Empire,
 but because this was a matter of living out his faith.
 That was where he drew the line.
 But even then, he didn't go marching in the streets in protest.

DANIEL 1:8-16

He asked for and got permission to live differently,
 in order to be faithful to God.
 God blessed him,
 and he was able to maintain his kosher diet.
 Sometimes, if you ask properly, you can circumvent a rule.

But not always.

DANIEL 3:1-18

God is able to rescue us, and he will rescue us.
 But even if he does not....
 They knew the power of their God,
 but they also knew there was no guarantee what God would choose to do in this situation.
 Even if he does not rescue us,
 we will not worship this image.
 This government edict is unjust,
 and we will not give in to it.
 We worship only the one true God.
 To what are you so committed that you would willingly lay your life on the line for it?
 Maybe your children? Your spouse?
 What about God?

DANIEL 3:19-30

It worked out well for them.
 God showed his power, God showed HIMSELF,
 and they were rescued from the flames.
 But... they said.... Even if he does not.
 That suggests that an act of civil disobedience may not be called for
 unless you are completely convinced a law is unjust and must be disobeyed.
 You must be ready and willing to pay the price of disobedience.
 Is your faith able to say, "I believe God will... but even if he does not..."?
 That would not be the last time these men would face such a choice.
 The Babylonians fell to the Medio-Persian Empire,
 and a new king came to the throne.
 By this time Daniel was an old man, perhaps 80.
 But the same sort of challenges would be faced.

DANIEL 6:1-24

Out of jealousy toward Daniel and his success,

the other rulers set a trap by persuading King Darius to communicate a new law.
 I'm always surprised by how people of power
 can be schmoozed and persuaded to do things that
 stroke their own ego but make no sense for the people they govern.
 The law said: Pray to anyone or anything but King Darius, and you end up being thrown to the lions.
 You must give your ultimate loyalty and your greatest obedience to the governing authority.
 In other words, Daniel and his people were required to
 write "Government" with a capital G, and write "god" with a little g.
 The penalty for not doing so... a terrible, bloody and painful death.
 I've been around lions in the wild,
 while on a safari in southern Mozambique.
 We're talking about a nine-foot-long apex predator.
 I saw a pride of lions strip the hind quarter of a zebra
 in a matter of minutes,
 leaving only clean bones and a bit of blood in the dust.
 The penalty for praying to anyone but the king was....
 clean bones and blood in the dust.

But Daniel would not pray to the king,
 and he would not abandon his regular prayers to the one true God.
 He got caught.
 The king was upset, but even he could not change the law.
 But even as he was condemning Daniel to death in the jaws of the lions,
 he prayed, well, he sort of prayed,
 "May your God rescue you."
 And he did!
 God played the role of lion tamer,
 and not one lion had one taste of Daniel.
 The same cannot be said of Daniel's enemies,
 who were then thrown into the lion's den.

But the truth is, it does not always turn out so well... at least in terms of life in this world.
 Remember those who said,
 "God can rescue us.
 But even if he does not..."
 I want faith like that.

We see some of the same challenges and the same display of stubborn, uncompromising faith in the New Testament.
 Peter and John had walked into the outer court of the temple
 and encountered a man with a serious disability and unable to walk.
 They prayed for him in the name of Jesus, and God healed him.
 As you might expect, that garnered a lot of attention.
 People gathered around,
 so Peter and John took the opportunity to preach the gospel
 and invite people to repent and believe in Jesus. (Ac.3)

That got the attention of the religious leaders.
 They arrested Peter and John,
 put them behind bars for the night,
 and then brought them out for interrogation the next day.
 True to form, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit
 and took the opportunity to present the gospel to them!
 All the way up to and including the verse that says,
 "Salvation is found in no one else,
 for there is no other name under heaven given to people
 by which we must be saved." (Ac.4:12)

Their boldness was shocking to the religious elite.
 They had to get this under control right away.

ACTS 4:18-20

You decide if it's right for us to obey you or obey God.

The officials were totally flummoxed,
 gave them a good talking to,
 ordered them to never again preach Christ,
 and turned them loose.

In the very next chapter, it's Peter and the others against the religious officials once again.

The officials denounced the message of the Christians.

“Peter and the others replied, ‘We must obey God rather than people.’”

(Ac.5:29)

And again, they were ordered to NOT preach Christ,
 and were let go.

We must obey God rather than human authorities.

It was civil disobedience of a sort.

Daniel, Shadrack, Meschack, Abednego, Peter and John,
 all engaged in civil disobedience against the authorities.
 Which seems to fly in the face of Romans 13 saying
 all governing authorities are instituted by God so submit.

But they disobeyed not because they had basic policy disagreements.

And not because they didn't like a certain political leader or party.

It was only when push came to shove,
 and obedience to the human authorities would have required them to
 forfeit their deeply held religious convictions.

They knew the truth of what Jesus said,

“No one can serve two masters.

 Either you will hate the one and love the other,

 or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Mt.6:24)

Jesus said it in the context of not getting too focused on material stuff and money.

But the principle is much broader than that.

 You cannot serve God AND ANYthing else... or ANYONE else.

 Sooner or later your service to “God AND whatever” will come into conflict,
 and you'll have to make a choice.

 It's better to make that choice before you get there.

Most of us have been fortunate to not have to make such a choice.

But what if?

After all, we've seen instances in the news of people of faith and their organizations that felt
 they'd been backed into a corner and had a choice to make.

Earlier in the pandemic, and during some severe lockdown orders,
 some pastors and congregations went up against state governments that required them to
 shut down completely,
 or allowed gatherings of no more than 10 people,
 while other organizations were given much more leeway for larger gatherings.
 Some congregations gathered anyway,
 while others went through legal channels, even into courtrooms,
 to argue their point.

What do you do if you are firmly pro-life,
 and you are required to pay taxes that help pay for abortions?

What does a teacher do if they are required to teach as fact that
 the central foundation of our nation's history is slavery and racism,
 or that gender identity is cultural and not biological,
 rather than “God created them male and female”?

What do you do when you are forced to provide your services as
 a photographer, a florist, a baker, or a venue owner
 to a wedding ceremony you believe to be immoral?

And will the day come,
 as it has in some European nations,
 when that requirement is pressed on pastors?

What are Catholic nuns to do if they are required to
 supply health insurance for lay employees

that provides contraceptives and even abortifacients
 which they believe to be immoral?
 What do you do when you're facing a family of illegal immigrants who are cold and hungry,
 and you know the government says "turn them in"
 but the Bible says "show hospitality to the sojourner"?
 What do you do if your boss requires you to lie,
 or at least to withhold the truth,
 in order to make a sale?
 Or not have to pay an insurance claim?
 What about this nurse, told to keep distance from everyone she peeked in on at the nursing home?
 COVID, you know.
 They said, "Don't touch them unless they require a medical intervention."
 One day she was checking up on a 98 year old lady.
 As the nurse stood by the door,
 asking if she felt ok today,
 the isolation and loneliness came over the old lady in a river of tears.
 She'd not been able to see her son or daughter for 6 weeks.
 She wanted to die.
 Because at 98 the waiting is too much.
 She insisted she'd rather hug her kids and die from COVID
 than never touch them again and die from loneliness.
 The nurse offered to FaceTime her son.
 She cried more.
 She wanted a real hug.
 The nurse finally said, "Enough."
 She went in, bent over, and hugged her,
 and those elderly arms wrapped tight around the nurse.
 The nurse said,
 "I broke the rules.
 We both had a healing that day.
 Then I snuck her daughter and son.
 And I'd do it again.
 Love matters most."
 What would you do?
 If push came to shove,
 and an authority to whom you are accountable required something of you
 that was contrary to your faith...
 whether that authority was your employer,
 city, state or federal government,
 whatever or whoever...
 have you prayed and thought through such things,
 so that you could stand with Peter and say,
"I must obey God rather than any human authority"?

Hashem's parents had escaped to the US from Iran just as the Shah fell and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power.

Hashem was born a few years later.

By then his parents had settled into the culture,
 but they were not yet citizens, but legal residents.

So, by birth he had dual citizenship.

The US was what he knew,
 and he loved the freedoms and abundance he lived with.

His parents told him of the old days in Iran, the ancient culture,
 taught him to speak Farsi and about their Muslim faith.

He wore his Iranian heritage proudly as a part of his identity.
While he did not look favorably on the Islamic Republic of Iran,
he appreciated the older history and culture of his people.
And so he maintained his dual citizenship.

Hashem kept up with the news out of Iran,
reading a translated Iranian newspaper,
and eventually finding some of the new ayatollah's speeches online.
The more he learned, the more uncomfortable he became.
There were daily calls to "destroy the Great Satan," that is, the United States.
He saw how freedoms were being destroyed in Iran, and protesters imprisoned.
He learned of Iranian funding to various terrorist groups in other lands.
And the day finally came when he could not continue this divided life.
He began the process toward renouncing his Iranian citizenship.

You and I have dual citizenship.

We are citizens of the United States.

But our eternal citizenship is in the kingdom of God,
and our ultimate loyalty is to Jesus.

Right? Right?