

## **The Christian and the Government**

*To the Romans...Pt. 22*

It is so good to be back with you. I've missed you. But I have to be honest, I needed a vacation and we had a wonderful one. I want to thank Chris Rau and Connor Davis for filling the pulpit and allowing me to get away. It was refreshing to body, mind and spirit. Mostly we were in Maine exploring the coast and the forests and the mountains, and often wearing jackets while we were doing it – sorry.

For the last ¼ of the vacation we made our way across upstate New York, eventually arriving at Niagara Falls. But we took our time, driving across scenic highways instead of interstates and it was well worth the extra effort. Beautiful hills and farm land – those domed silos and big red barns that – because of TV shows and books - I always associated with the country growing up, but never actually saw in Texas.

We stayed a couple of days in Cooperstown, New York and Ari and I made a pilgrimage to the sacred ground that is the Baseball Hall of Fame. And we took in *a lot* of history along the way. We explored Civil War forts along the coast, World War 2 defenses against submarines, saw where the women's rights movement began in America.

And, probably my favorite, we spent an afternoon scouting out the site of one of the most important battles in the American Revolution. In September and October of 1777 at the Battle of Saratoga, the upstart Americans defeated a much larger, more experienced British force, a victory that showed the world we were a serious cause and directly led to the French entering the war on our side. Historians agree that Saratoga was the turning point of the War for Independence. Without that we'd all likely be speaking English today...well, you know what I mean, we'd at least be drinking more tea!

Now, today of course is the Fourth of July – Independence Day – and I must admit I was quite proud of my country and her history while I was surveying that battlefield. As I stood there in front of those descriptive signs surrounded by empty fields and picturesque cannons, I was definitely cheering on the invisible militiamen – even the complicated “hero” of the day, Benedict Arnold.

But it did get me thinking about the sermon that I knew I had to prepare when I got home. The nice thing about preaching a series – like the one we're in on Romans – is that you always know what's coming next. We finished Chapter 12 last time, so it's on to Chapter 13 this time.

And as it so happened, Chapter 13 is all about the relationship of a Christian to the State, to governing authorities. I did not plan it this way – to be talking about what the Bible has to say about a nation on the actual anniversary of our nation – I’m not that good. But I believe God is. And it is a timely text. Because how the Christian relates to the secular State is one of *the* most contentious and controversial issues – not only in our age – but in the history of the Church itself. Shoot, it was controversial when Jesus still walked the earth.

And it’s complicated. I couldn’t help thinking about that complication on the Saratoga battlefield. Let me tell you a quick story by way of introduction. It’s a tale of two Johns. This charming little red farmhouse, with a nearly 360-degree panoramic view of the area, was built by John Neilson in 1775 or 1776. John had migrated along the Hudson River valley from New Jersey about a decade before and leased and developed a 100 acre farm here that he finally made profitable enough to enable him to marry Lydia, his landlord’s daughter.

His neighbor, just 6/10ths of a mile north, was John Freeman. His ancestors came to America on a ship that accompanied the Mayflower. He had established his farm about ten years before the battle as well. The land of both of the Farmer John neighbors would play important roles in American history. The Neilson Farmhouse was used by the Americans as a mid-level headquarters, housing several officers, including the notorious Benedict Arnold. You can walk around it today.

Less than a mile away, John Freeman too had a little farmhouse that you *can’t* see today, because it was in the middle of what would become the apex of the fighting, “Freemans’ Field”; and the house, and everything around it, was blown to smithereens. Now, here’s where I got really interested in these two neighbors.

John Neilson sent Lydia off to her parents about two miles away and he joined up with the local militia as a sergeant and played a key role in the battle himself – scouting the area he knew so well. John Freeman also fought at the Battle of Saratoga on his own land...for the British. His family were loyalists and had already fled to Canada when the Revolution began. Now he returned with the Canadian and Indian forces to fight his neighbor for King and Country.

Now remember, the two Johns had been neighbors for a decade. Their farm land was adjacent to one another. No doubt they helped one another during a harvest or two. They may have built barns together. Both were Christians. I wasn’t able to find where either attended church – these are minor figures in history – but there weren’t that many churches in rural New York in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. It’s possible that they attended the same house of worship. Certainly the read from the same Bible. But when it came to decisions about government, they made radically different choices. Choices that would directly impact the rest of their lives and family legacies.

The gospel is simple – “For God so loved the world that he gave His only son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” – but *applying* that gospel to the world around us is not simple at all. It’s very complex. It takes a lot of wisdom and a lot of humility. And the same is true about the passage of scripture that we come to this morning.

Romans chapter 13 is one of the most controversial texts in all the Bible. I think it is one of the most misunderstood texts in the Bible. And therefore, it is one of the most *abused* texts in scripture. It has been used to support some of the worst tyrants and dictators in human history. It has been used by Christians to turn a blind eye – or worse, engage in – some of the most egregious human rights violations known to man. Slavery, segregation, apartheid, state torture and genocide have all been excused by making reference to Romans 13. It was the passage quoted by the Protestant Church in Germany to justify their endorsement of Hitler and the Nazis.

I have heard it referenced countless times in recent years in regards to the political tensions of our current situation. Interestingly, I hear Christians quote Romans 13 a ton when *their* preferred candidate is in office...and *never mentioned* when the candidate they don’t like is elected. And of course, one of the

grossest forms of hypocrisy is using a scripture to judge *you* and ignoring what it says to me. Romans 13 has pointed out a lot of specks in the eyes of others while ignoring a lot of planks in their own.

And we don’t want to do that. So I am going to explore this tricky, tricky passage, we’re going to *wrestle* with it this morning. And I won’t pretend that we will end with total understanding or even full agreement as a congregation – you can still have a tale of two Johns. But I think we can come to a place of humility that will allow us to hopefully avoid a couple of traps that people tend to fall in – on either end of the political spectrum – when they misapply this text.

So let’s just start off by reading it and then we’ll begin to break it down. **Romans 13:1–7**, “*Everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended.*”

*4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.*

*6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."*

And all the accountants said, Amen! Ok, there it is, what do we do with that? Well, let's start by asking, why is this here to begin with? You know, a lot of people look at Romans and think this doesn't belong. Like Paul just had another train of thought suddenly and wrote it down before he forgot. I don't think so. I think this placement makes perfect sense in context.

You see, you can't read Romans 13 without Romans 12. I hope you know that Paul didn't include chapters and verse numbers? That was all added hundreds of years later. There's nothing sacred about any of that – in fact, it can confuse the actual meaning of the text at times. You have to read scripture in its context.

A professor I like says, "A biblical text out of context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to say." That's the kind of thing that is behind a lot of the misuse of this passage.

So you can't read the state "does not bear the sword for nothing" without reading **Romans 12:17**, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil.*" This all goes together to form a full picture of Christian behavior. We've been away a while, so let me remind you that we are in the closing section of Paul's letter to the church at Rome where he is applying his earlier theological teachings to their day-to-day lives. Here's how you practically live out everything he discusses in the first half of the letter.

And so this section starting in Chapter 12 is addressing how our faith guides us in our relationships. Romans 12:3-13 deals mainly with our relationship to other people in the church – other Christians. Verses 14-21 deal with our relationship to the people *outside* of the church – people that don't believe what we believe, even people who would want to *hurt* us for what we believe – our enemies. And by extension, chapter 13 asks, "How do I interact to people in the aggregate, in the realm of the state. Not just how do I relate to my neighbor, but my fellow citizens."

And by the way, this would have been a crucial topic both to the time and the place that Paul was writing this letter. Who is his audience again? The church in...*Rome*. Being “in Rome” brings up special problems for believers their *vis-à-vis* the state. A little like writing to the church in Austin, or in Washington D.C. – it just carries a little more urgency when you live in the seat of government.

Also, remember this is a mixed church of Jewish and Gentile Christians. That had implications on your view of Rome. Imagine a church in the Valley made up of Hispanic citizens and non-citizens discussing how to relate to border issues, verses an all white church in Kansas – it’s going to be a different conversation. Jews saw Rome as an oppressive enemy force whose very presence in the Holy Land was blasphemy to God.

Not only that, we know that Paul is writing this letter in the mid-50’s AD. For most of the 40’s the Jews had been expelled from Rome – including Jewish followers of Jesus – under the orders of Emperor Claudias, only returning between AD 49 and AD 53. So this was fresh. And additionally, *upon* their return, they were taxed at a higher rate than everyone else in order to keep them more in line. So we could understand why Paul felt the need to mention taxes – egregious taxes even.

So that’s the context, let’s see what Paul has to say to Christians about interacting with the State. And I want to break this into three categories. First let’s see the *purpose* of the state – of government. Then we’ll ask, What is the *duty* of Christians toward the State? And we’ll close out by asking, What are the *limits* of Christians toward the Sate? Church and State; purpose, duty and limits. Let’s go...

**First, What is the purpose of the State?** This will be the shortest point, because I think it’s the most straightforward. We find the answer hidden in Paul’s explanation for why we should submit to governing authorities – which we will discuss under point two – look at the end of **v.1**, “...*for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*”

There have always been governing authorities be they tribal chiefs, hereditary kings, sacred councils, violent warlords or elected officials. Why? Because, Paul says, God wanted it that way. And it has to do with God’s nature. God opposes chaos and supports order. You see it in the very creation of the world. Look back at Genesis 1 and 2 and you see something unique in all the creation myths you encounter from ancient history. Most of them are very fanciful – cosmic battles and violence and dragons and what not. But the Genesis accounts of creation are almost scientific in their order. In fact, early scientists pointed to Genesis as exactly that.

There is a rational progression on display. In the beginning the earth was formless and empty and covered in darkness. It's like some of your apartments in college, just utter chaos! And then God turns on the lights. And then God created day and night, anyone who has been to Alaska knows how helpful *that* is. Then you have the separation of land and water. And the vegetation is introduced to the land. Well, seeds are the birthplace of life, so that makes sense. I don't know which came first, the chicken or the egg, but I know there was seed before either of them.

And then there is the creation of seasons – cyclical weather patterns. And stars and moon to control other natural process like tides and growth cycles. And then it says the waters got living creatures. Even the Darwinists believe life began in the sea. Then it says birds are introduced and after a bit, the land got living creatures, mammals. Cows, dogs, lions, snakes, what have you. Not fire-ants, though. They clearly arrived after the Fall as a direct invasion of hell.

But finally, you arrive at the ultimate mammal, you and me. Except human kind are radically different from animal kind – we are created, it says, “in God's image”. Which among other things means we prefer order to chaos as well and therefore we continue on in God's pattern of creativity – starting small and building big.

But you notice that all of this is painting a picture moving *away* from chaos. And the pinnacle is humanity. We are to be the very picture of order. And for order to work, there has to be a hierarchy. If we want to discuss something as a church and everyone starts talking at once, that's chaos – we'll never accomplish anything. Someone has to have the authority to recognize who has the floor – “The chair recognizes team A, and team B shut up until it's your turn to speak.”

Just imagine a series of roads in which everyone determines for themselves how fast they will go. Some of you say, “I don't have to imagine, I've *been* to Houston!” You don't want to drive in chaos and you don't want to *live* in chaos. And for that, you need authorities to establish order. And it really doesn't matter what kind of authorities they are. After all, a dictator can keep the trains running on time. Any governmental structure can maintain order, and any order is better than chaos. There's a new *Purge* movie out this weekend to prove my point.

So looking at an atlas, you can say that God has *established* the Chinese Communist government, and God *established* the Socialist government in Denmark, and God *established* the autocratic authoritarian government of Hungary, and God *established* the Islamic fundamentalist government of Iran and God *established* the Democratic Republic of these United States of America.

Those forms of government – as radically diverse and even contradictory as they are – all have something in common. They are better than *no* government. They keep chaos at bay. I’m not saying I wouldn’t rather live in some than in others, but I’ll take any of them over a Mad Max dystopia where only the strongest survive. And so does God.

But we have to be clear about something. God’s establishment of a government does not indicate God’s endorsement of that government. This is so important. Too many people say, “Well so-and-so got elected, I guess that’s God’s man or woman for the hour.” Not at all. Now, God will certainly *use* that person to establish His own ends. God *used* the wicked governments of Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and even Rome. But that does not mean that God approves.

Here’s a quote I like by the Quaker theologian John Howard Yoder. “The librarian does not create nor approve of the books she or he catalogs and shelves. Likewise God does not take the responsibility for the existence of the rebellious “powers that be” or for their shape or identity; they already are. What the text says is that God orders them, brings them into line, providentially and permissively lines them up with divine purposes.”

“This is true of all governments...It applies to the governments of dictators and tyrants as well as to constitutional democracies...A given government is not mandated or saved or made a channel of the will of God; it is simply lined up, used by God in the ordering of the cosmos. **It does not mean that what individuals in government do is good human behavior.** As we noted, the librarian does not approve the content of a book he or she shelves; God did not approve morally of the brutality whereby Syria chastised Israel (Isaiah 10).”  
(*The Politics of Jesus*, John Yoder, 202-203)

So in a pursuit of order over chaos, God ordains and establishes secular authority structures, but it doesn’t mean God approves of each and every one of those structures. So be careful about using this verse to crow whoever your preferred political party is on top. Remember, God “established” the Republicans and the Democrats in America in the same way He did Kim Jong-il in North Korea.

So if that’s *why* we have governing authorities – to make sure you don’t get murdered in your bed by *banditos* - what is our responsibility, specifically as Christians, to those authorities? That’s the **second point, What is the duty of Christians toward the State?** Well, Paul doesn’t hide it. It’s made clear in the very first thing he says. **Romans 13:1**, “*Everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities...*”

Now, that “everyone” means this is universal. *Everybody* must submit to governmental authority or face the consequences. Paul’s not saying this only applies to Christians, his point is Christians are not *excluded* from the submission. You can’t say, “I’m a Christian so I’m not going to pay my taxes, I’ll send it to the church instead.” Nope, can’t do that. The IRS will get you, and God will say, “Serves you right.”

Why? Because if everybody decided not to pay taxes – and let’s face it, nobody likes to pay taxes – but then we would have chaos. You couldn’t pave the streets, you couldn’t pay the cops, there would be no food inspectors and we’d have diarrhea all the time! Chaos! No, taxes ensure order. Everyone has to do their part. Everyone has to submit.

And this word “submit” is key. As we’ve seen again and again, Paul is a meticulous theologian, his vocabulary choices matter. Paul does not here command Christians to “obey” the government authorities. If Paul had intended the Church to always obey the State, he could have used a very common word – *hupokouo* – to make his point.

Be he *doesn’t* do that, instead he stays with the “order” word group and directs believers to be “*subordinate*” to the power that God has “ordered” in the creation of the universe. One commentator puts it like this; “Paul calls believers to “submit” to governing authorities rather than to “obey” them; and Paul’s choice of words may be important to our interpretation and application of Paul’s exhortation. To submit is to recognize one’s subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have “authority” over us.” (Moo, 797)

It can’t just be blind obedience. First of all that defies the logic of Paul’s argument. You notice, all of this is predicated on an ideal situation. Look at **v.3**, “*For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended.*” And yet any history book – heck, any local news broadcast – can show you instances where doing what is right actually gets you *in trouble* with the governing authorities. If your governing authorities tell you to turn in your Jewish neighbors for extermination, you *shouldn’t* obey that. The *right* thing to do is disobey. But that doesn’t mean you don’t recognize their authority. You still say “sir”, you just say, “No, sir.”



You see blind obedience is about fear. “If I don’t obey, they’re going to get me!” The Christian is never to be motivated by fear. Fear is the enemy of faith. It’s incompatible. No, Paul gives us *our* motivation in **v.5**, “*Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.*” To be a Christian means that you have a conscience that is guided by the Holy Spirit. We’re going to talk in detail about matters of conscience next week. You do the right thing, *because* it’s the right thing to do.

Why do you pay your taxes? Because the IRS will get you if you don’t? No. That’s what the world does. Christians should pay their taxes because it’s the right thing to do. Because it’s a concrete way of preferring your neighbor to yourself – of putting the needs of others ahead of your own needs. That’s always to be the Christian attitude.

Pastor Tim Keller puts this really well, “To obey only out of fear of punishment is obedience out of self-interest, and that will lead you astray. On the one hand, self-interest can lead to too little submission to the state, because you will probably disobey when there is no prospect of punishment. On the other hand, fear of punishment could very easily lead you to too much submission to the state, because you will do immoral things ‘because I was just taking orders’. Paul’s radical principle is: we obey our government out of our Christian conscience, out of our obedience to God alone.” (Keller, *Romans* 2, 134)

So because God ordered the world away from chaos and established the concept of governmental authority to maintain that order, everyone must sub-ordinate themselves – submit – to those authorities. But unlike non-believers, Christians don’t just do it out of fear of punishment but because their conscious is guided by the Holy Spirit to do the right thing.

And if you follow that Spirit-led conscience you will be less-likely to abuse this – let’s face it - very popular to abuse passage. Just one contemporary example because it is so egregious. In 2017, facing criticism from religious leaders over the President’s handling of undocumented children at our border – ie. The “kids in cages” controversy – then Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, gave a speech in which he said, and I quote, “I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.”

Irregardless of your own politics or personal views on that particular issue, that is a blatant misuse of Paul’s counsel to the church at Rome. That’s why I always get real nervous when agents of the State start quoting my scriptures – stay in your lane. I don’t come to your house and preach on law code. That’s about authoritarian control, not Spirit-guided truth. That’s how you wind up with the church endorsing a Hitler.

So submission yes, obedience...*maybe*, I mean obedience is obviously a *part* of submission...but not always. And that brings us to our third and final point, **What are the *limits* of Christian submission toward the State?** Limits are an important part of order. This is why, Paul grounds his example about paying taxes to the principle of what is due. He says in **v.7**, “*Give to everyone what you owe them...*”

Paul is here echoing Jesus himself when he was asked a question – interestingly enough – also about whether religious people should pay taxes to a pagan state. It’s a fascinating story that I could go into more detail later, but Jesus’ summary statement is (**Mark 12:17**) “~~*Then Jesus said to them,*~~ “*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.*”

There are some things that you owe to Caesar, to the State...and there are some things you do *not*! In fact, there are plenty of other places in Scripture – this is why, by the way, you always have to interpret scripture in light of scripture – there are places that make it clear that you better *not* give to Caesar what only belongs to God.

For instance, the church has long coupled Romans chapter 13 with Revelation chapter 13 that warns of a time when the State will demand worship and anyone who doesn’t obey will be killed with that very sword

that Paul says the State has been given to wield. And it is very clear in that instance that the right thing for the Christian to do is *embrace* that sword instead of worshipping the state.

That’s not just a prophecy about the future, that’s already happened. In the Roman Empire, scores of Christians chose to embrace martyrdom for their faith rather than worship the Emperor. It’s worth noting, that this same governmental authority that Paul writes is established by God will later execute Paul...and Peter, as it had Jesus. There are clearly limits to submission.

It’s not new. In the Old Testament the three Hebrew servants and later Daniel, all chose execution rather than acknowledge King Nebuchadnezzar as god. The Bible is crystal clear from cover to over; God will share worship with no one and no thing. God alone is to be worshipped. Don’t forget this is Paul’s whole argument back in Romans chapter one about what has gone wrong with the world; idolatry. We turned good things into ultimate things – we worshipped created things in place of the Creator - and in return the whole world fell back towards chaos.

I don't have time to develop this fully, but I would be remiss not to share a warning, on this day of all days. I am very concerned with the rise of Christian Nationalism in our society today. There is a worship of America that is nothing short of blasphemous. Here's a souvenir I saw in a gift shop in San Antonio – this is one of many variants – but it is the cross of Jesus Christ made out of bullets and American flags.

Church, this is as blasphemous an object as an upside down Satanic cross. If you have one in your house, you need to remove it. That's not about patriotism. Patriotism is about love – love of country. That's fine. Because when you really love something, you critique and correct it when it does something wrong. I discipline my children, *because* I love them. I'm telling you not to have demonic objects like that in your house, *because* I love you.

But nationalism is not about love, but about power. So above all else, I want my nation to be on top, so I want it to be powerful. And that means that whatever my nation does is right, simply because it's my nation doing it – more likely, the faction of my nation that I have identified as “true America”. Christian Nationalism is political ideology dressed up as religious orthodoxy.

Again, I owe you a full sermon on this, but I think Christian Nationalism is the most dangerous threat facing the Church of Jesus Christ in our nation today. Way more dangerous than anything secular society could throw at us. Because this is coming from the *inside*. And Paul always warned that the false gospel was way more dangerous than just ignorant paganism

Listen I have nothing against patriotism within it's proper limits. I am patriotic. When I was at Saratoga, there was no question of whose side I was on. I saw the grave of a prominent British general who had been killed in action and I was like, “Well, sucks to be you.”

I love my country. But I am crystal clear that it is not my *highest* allegiance. That belongs to my citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven and to King Jesus, and to him *alone*. I am first and foremost a Christian, and *then* I am an American...and then a Texan. The hierarchy goes, the lamb, the bald eagle and the longhorn...that's the order! So you do not owe the governing authorities worship. That you *must not* obey.

So let's end by talking about what not obeying looks like. Because again, Paul writes to correct two abuses. Don't give over your ultimate allegiance to the State – no unquestioned obedience. But the Christian also has a set of ethical considerations when it comes to *how* we disobey. What are the grounds for civil disobedience?

Peter gives a clear demonstration of Paul's principle of limits in the book of Acts when told by the authorities to stop preaching about Christ and his resurrection. Look at what he says, **Acts 5:27-29**, *“The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.” Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!”*

Peter and the rest of the Apostles were publicly announcing that they would disobey the command of the authorities in this instance. So the Bible gives a very clear basis for civil disobedience; namely, if the state commands what God forbids, or if the state forbids what God commands, then **civil disobedience** is a Christian duty.

Now, you better make sure it's really what God commands. Our selfish, sinful hearts have a habit of doing bad things and then blaming God for it. So if for example you are pro-life – I am too – but if you were to say, “I don't support abortion and the government provides abortion with tax dollars so therefore I'm not going to pay taxes.” Well, that *sounds* spiritual, but it's rebellion. “If you owe taxes, pay taxes” is what the Bible says. So God's not in it, and you're going to get what you get. Civil disobedience doesn't apply to *everything* you don't agree with.

Now, we have an advantage today that Paul didn't have when he wrote his letter to the Romans. We live in a constitutional democracy. And that means that – unlike living in Communist China, for example – we have a great deal of say in how our government functions – “of the people, by the people” after all. Paul didn't get to vote for Emperor. Paul didn't have a bill of rights that granted him guaranteed free speech or freedom of religion.

So in this country, criticizing your government when you think it's wrong, protesting against your government, voting and organizing others to vote with you for change, calling an elected official a “bozo”, none of that is insubordinate behavior. Because the foundation of your governing authority is not a person or a collection of persons, but a document. And the Constitution allows you to do those things. So one could argue that the *duty* of a good Christian citizen could include all of the above.

But there are still Christian limits as to *how* we do these things. In fact, I think we need to be thoughtful of where our free speech rights intersect with God's command to "bless your enemies and not curse" so maybe even be careful with the "bozo" talk. But we can do a lot of things as Christian Americans, what we *can't* do is rebel.

**Romans 13:2**, "*Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is **rebelling against what God has instituted**, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*" What is the difference between rebellion and civil disobedience? It's nuanced for sure, but let me use a couple of contemporary examples from the past year – one from the progressive side and one from the conservative.

If you believe that systemic racism is infecting the police force of your local municipality, you have every right to draw attention to that. You have every right to call for the removal of the police chief or the mayor. You have every right to propose new legislation. You have the First Amendment right to march in the streets in protest.

What you *cannot* do is throw a brick at a police officer. What you cannot do is overturn a police car. What you cannot do is burn down a department store. That is rebellion. And those who do so will bring judgement on themselves. You get what you get. And I would add, even more important, as a Christian, you bring shame to the reputation of the Church.

Now, I said I had two examples. If you believe that nefarious agents manipulated voting machines, changed or added ballots, and generally stole an election, you have every right to draw attention to that. You have every right to call for the removal of elected officials. You have every right to propose new legislation. You have the First Amendment right to march in the streets in protest – right up to Washington DC itself.

What you *cannot* do is throw a brick at a news reporter. What you cannot do is erect a gallows and threaten a lynching. What you cannot do is storm the Capitol building mowing down uniformed officers and destroying historical property in your wake. That is rebellion. And those who do so will bring judgement on themselves. You get what you get. And I would add, even more important, as a Christian, you bring shame to the reputation of the Church.

Again, there's a difference between subordination and obedience. You can disobey the State without resorting to rebellion. Again, our Quaker theologian, John Yoder, puts it well; "Subordination is significantly different from obedience. The conscientious objector who refuses to do what government demands, but still remains under the sovereignty of that government and **accepts the penalties which it imposes**, or the Christian who refuses to worship Caesar but still permits Caesar to put him or her to death, is being subordinate even though not obeying." (Yoder, 209)

Let me say one final thing about Christian civil disobedience; the Bible is clear, Jesus own example is the clearest proof we need. God may permit you as a Christian – require you even – to lay down your life in disobedience to the State. But God will never allow you to *take* a life in doing the same.

Listen, Church and State issues are complicated issues. I'm still not sure which of our two Farmer Johns were on God's side – maybe both, maybe neither. I certainly don't have all the answers to the myriad of societal ills facing our nation today. But I know that above all else, the Christians call is to an ethic of love.

We didn't read this in our text, but look what Paul writes in the later part of the chapter, **Romans 13:9-10**, "*Whatever other commands there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore **love is the fulfillment of the law.**"*

Did Jesus have issues with the governing authorities of his day? Both in Israel and in Rome? You bet he did. Did he roll over and acquiesce to everything they said. He absolutely did not. But what he did do was love them. Love them at the cost of laying down his life.

Are you political? Fine. But if you are a Christian, you are commanded to imitate the politics of Jesus. You can't understand Romans 13 without Romans 12 and the foundation of both – whether it's about the person next to you at church, or your government, or your biggest enemy - is always love.

Let's pray...