

*** The Heights Baptist Church * Sermon Series: Doctrine ***
*** Topic: What is Government * Rom. 13:1-10 * 6/28/26 ***

MAIN POINT

As Christ's ambassadors, we are called to love others, with one of our highest goals being to draw them to Christ. This goal includes not so much resistance and winning arguments, but rather loving others and demonstrating our faith through our transformed lives.

INTRODUCTION

In what area of life do you feel the strongest tension between living as a citizen of your country and living as a citizen of God's kingdom?

Do you know a friend on Facebook who relentlessly posts their views on politics? How effective do you think this is at getting people to switch their political views? How helpful do you think this strategy is at drawing others to Christ?

In today's lesson, we will be looking at three passages from the Bible that help us see God's perspective on how we are to relate to our government as Christians, with the goal of advancing the Kingdom of Christ.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 22:15-22

This question was asked of Jesus as a trap. What difficulties are embedded in this question?

If Jesus said that it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, He would be perceived by the majority of the Jews as approving of Roman oppression against the Jews, alienating Him from the Jews. If Jesus said that it was not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus could be arrested and charged with rebellion against Rome.

What are the implications for us in Jesus' response to the Pharisees?

God doesn't need our money. Give to the government whatever temporary things it wants and give God what matters for eternity. Caesar's image is on coins. Let Caesar have coins. God's image is on people.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ROMANS 13:1-7

What do these verses tell us about how we are to relate to the government, and why?

How can submitting to the government actually be a way to serve God?

We need to be subject to governing authorities, since God has placed them in power. Part of the benefit of submitting to them is that it will free us up to serve Christ in other ways.

In what ways is this advice similar to the answer Jesus gave about paying taxes in Matthew 22?

Christians are commanded to be submissive to governing authorities. This direction was given by Paul when Rome was in power. Rome was oppressing Israel, and would soon be persecuting the church. God expects His people to be model citizens and to relate to the government in a respectful, obedient way.

What reasons does the text give for obeying and respecting authority?

One reason was the practical fact of the government's authority to punish wrongdoers. The second valid reason was because of conscience. This is a higher motivation than fear of punishment.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ROMANS 13:8-10

How does this emphasis on loving neighbor fit in with the guidance given in verses 1-7?

Our primary motivation needs to be love. Love for God, and love for people.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 PETER 2:11-17

What two reasons are given for living our lives above reproach in verses 11-12?

Sinful desires war against our souls. And living our lives above reproach will be noticed by our co-workers, neighbors, and family members. Our lives should reflect Christ to a lost and needy world.

How does the reminder in verse 11 that we are aliens and strangers here input to all of this?

We are in this world, but not of this world. We are citizens of heaven, and our job here is to be salt and light, drawing people to Christ.

Looking at verse 17, what might the relationship be between these things and "fearing God"?

Our motivation in all of this is to submit to God as our ultimate authority.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 PETER 2:18-24

Slavery was common in the Roman empire. How is this an even more extreme example than what we've already considered about how we are to relate to people as Christians?

As Christians, we are to sacrifice our "rights" to advance the gospel.

How is Jesus our ultimate example in all of this?

Jesus submitted to a gross injustice without retaliating for the sake of the gospel. And the way He found the strength to do this was by entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly (v. 23).

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ ACTS 5:29 AND 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4

What do these two passages add to why we are to submit to governing authorities, and also about limits to that submission?

By submitting to governing authorities, we will generally be improving our quality of life, allowing us to continue serving the Lord. But this submission is not to cross over into disobeying God. We can pay taxes to a government that aborts children, but we are not to participate in such sins.

How do all of these principles fit in with peacefully making public stands for moral issues that don't align with God's word?

We have a great privilege as Americans with the right to practice our religion, the right to vote, and the right to free speech. We can and should use these freedoms in a way that advances God's kingdom in a loving way.

APPLICATION

The following is an actual Facebook post from by a Christian (We'll call him Bob) who attends The Heights, posted on November 2020 (Election night).

"Whatever happens in the election tonight, my marching orders are the same; 'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.' Colossians 3: 12-14"

Any thoughts about the strengths or weaknesses of posting this verse on election night?

Here is an actual reply to the post by a Christian friend (we'll call him Cliff): "I see us conservatives posting things like this left and right. None of my liberal friends say anything like this. If they lose, they will burn down the country. Tells you something about our character."

Any thoughts about how posting this reply might serve to advance the gospel?

Here is an actual response to the reply by a non-Christian friend (we'll call her Joan) "Dear Cliff I don't know you, but I am a liberal friend who loves this land and is planning no arson tonight or ever. Please don't paint us all with one broad brush, and I will do the same. We are ALL God's precious children. My liberal friends are afraid of the same things happening on the conservative side. Let's not feed the fear or hate.... it's called the UNITED States."

Any thoughts about how Cliff's reply may have affected Joan? Has it drawn her closer to Christ?

Here is the actual private message from Bob to Cliff: "Hi Cliff, I just wanted to let you know that my post quoting Colossians was not meant to generate political discussion but rather reflect the love of Christ to our non-Christian friends on Facebook, of which we have several. I hid your comment from my post. This has nothing to do with the truth in your comment, just trying to help people see 'the reason for the hope' that we have, and to express this 'with gentleness and respect' (1 Peter 3: 15)."

Are there any other lessons you want to apply to your life, either from this Facebook exchange or from any of the scriptures we've discussed?

How do these principles align with the "L" from our "LIFE of a Disciple" acronym?

"Loving neighbor: I am motivated to show God's love and compassion to others where I live, work, and play. For more information on this, see the beginning of the "Commentary" section of this lesson.

"We fight for right thinking inside the church, and for sharing the gospel outside the church." Pastor Randy Hahn, The Heights Baptist Church, March 5th, 2023

PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for those you placed over us in our government, and all those in authority over us. We pray that you would direct them like streams of water wherever you please to accomplish your will, in order to speed the return of Christ and so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness, holiness, and dignity. Help us better understand what our roles as Christ's ambassadors should look like, and give us the grace to be able to carry that role out.

COMMENTARY

Information on “The LIFE of a Disciple” Acronym (There may be a poster in your classroom to use as a teaching aid)

This acronym is part of our “Starting Point” training programs. The letters in LIFE stand for the following:

Loving neighbor: I am motivated to show God’s love and compassion to others where I live, work, and play.

Intentional friend: I am purposefully cultivating relationships within my church family.

Faithful follower: I am sensitive to the moving of the Holy Spirit in regular times of prayer, worship, and Bible study.

Engaged disciple-maker: I am regularly looking to invest in others to help them take their next step in following Jesus.

Matthew 22:15-22

The diverse groups from among Jesus’ opponents (i.e., Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians)—normally hostile toward each other—joined forces to plot against Jesus. They attempted one final series of verbal attacks, expecting to embarrass Jesus in public. This would show him to be a fraud. It was illegal for the Jews to perform an execution; they would have to appeal to Roman authorities on the grounds of an imperial offense in order to have Jesus executed.

We will see first a joint attack by the Pharisees (a religious sect that opposed Roman rule in Israel) and the Herodians (a political party that supported Roman rule through the Herods) in 22:15-22. Next, the Sadducees would join the effort, bringing their trickiest question to bear (22:23-33). Finally, the Pharisees would return with a final attempt (22:34-40). All of those tricks Jesus would turn back before taking the final offensive (22:41-23:39).

22:15-17. The Pharisees plotted to put together a verbal trap for Jesus (the verb “to ensnare, entrap,” is used only here in the New Testament). The Herodians and probably the Sadducees were involved in the plotting, for their threefold attack in 22:15-40 was carefully coordinated. The Pharisees and Herodians approached Jesus first, beginning with hypocritical flattery. They addressed him as Teacher, partly to gain favor with the crowd, and partly to catch Jesus off guard. They claimed to know that Jesus was a man of integrity and that he taught the way of God, when in reality they believed him to be a heretic.

They also pointed out Jesus’ commitment to truth without consideration for the rank or social status of those who might agree or disagree with him. Jesus was known for being impartial toward all people and forthright in his teaching. They were hoping to coax Jesus into saying something politically incorrect.

Their statements about Jesus’ impartiality were intended to force him to take one side or another, thereby showing partiality. The question was whether it was right under Old Testament Law to pay the poll tax (we presume) to Caesar, the Roman emperor. The two groups that asked the question were on opposite sides of the issue. If Jesus answered, “Yes, it is right,” then he would show partiality toward the Herodians, who supported Roman rule. Then the Pharisees would accuse Jesus of sympathizing with the Romans. This was not a crime, but it was not a popular position among the Jews.

If Jesus answered, “No, it is not right,” then he would show partiality toward the Pharisees, who opposed Roman rule and saw Roman taxation as robbing from God. Then the Herodians could arrest him and bring him before Herod Antipas on charges of treason against the Roman Empire.

In either case, they thought, Jesus would show himself to be partial. He would also alienate part of his following, and he might incriminate himself under Roman law.

22:18. Jesus revealed that they were not really interested in his answer— only in trapping him in public. Jesus was a student of people—particularly his enemies—and their motives were obvious, no matter how much flattery they lavished on him. They were hypocrites because they pretended to be sincere inquirers after truth, when they were actually trying to trap him. His question revealed their true motives to the crowd. It also showed that such testing was unnecessary and inappropriate. Jesus had displayed more than enough evidence about his identity.

22:19-21. Jesus asked for the coin used to pay the poll tax, a denarius. Then he answered their question with a question, Whose portrait is this? (Portrait is the Greek word *eikon*, from which we derive the English icon.) And whose inscription? The critics gave the obvious answer that the image and inscription were Caesar's.

Jesus answered by saying there was nothing wrong with giving to each authority what was rightfully his. That is, it was right to give to the Roman Empire what was rightfully theirs, as indicated by Caesar's image and inscription on the coin. Such payment of tax was not robbery from God.

On the other hand, we also have an obligation to give to God what he demands. The two claims by the two authorities were not in conflict with each other. Obedience to both was not contradictory. Both God and civil government were valid authorities (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Jesus had remained impartial as well as committed to truth. He had sided with neither party in the debate over taxation, showing validity behind both sides.

22:22. Jesus' challengers were amazed at his answer, so they left him and went away.

Romans 13:1-10

13:1. In principle (though not always in specifics), to submit to the civil authority is to submit to God. The statement in this command which unlocks its meaning, and which gives Christians ground to accept it and apply it, is this: There is no authority except that which God has established. This is a statement of the overarching sovereignty and rule of God in the affairs of this world. If God has appointed every civil ruler, every governing authority, then why should any Christian fear submitting to that which God has appointed?

13:2. Rebelling against what God has instituted may bring discipline, more than likely through the rulers themselves. The fact that "governing authorities" are human authorities—sinners just like us—is perhaps what makes it so difficult. The key is found in Paul's words, what God has instituted. When rulers put themselves in the place of God by legislating moral or spiritual positions (all acts have moral and spiritual roots) which are contrary to the revealed positions of God, resistance is warranted.

13:3-5. Paul next explains the "why?" behind his statement in verse 2 that to rebel against authorities is to invite judgment upon oneself. In an "ideal" world, governing authorities are God's servant to do you good ... to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. The world is not a governmental theocracy in which God is king. Since Israel abandoned the direct theocratic rule God desired for them, and asked God for a king like "all the nations around us" (1 Sam. 8:5,20), even His chosen people have been governed by human rulers. There is no direct, geopolitical theocratic rule in place today; all people on earth are ruled by some sort of human authority. In Israel's case, this was to be a good thing (witness the moral and civil law codes given to Israel to protect their best interests) and should be a good thing for all nations.

Most governing authorities implement law codes that are basically moral, designed to protect citizens and to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Inherent in God's assignment of responsibility for authorities is not only the provision of good but the use of force (the sword) to restrain evil. There is no conflict here between Paul's words in Romans 12:19-20 about not taking vengeance, and his words about the use of the sword to restrain evil. The former is personal; the latter is constitutional. In the former, hatred (vengeance) is at work; in the latter, justice is at work.

Paul's last word in his explanation concerns motivation. While avoiding punishment is always a legitimate motivation for submitting to an authority, there is a higher motivation for the Christian's submission to the authorities—the motivation of a clear conscience. In order to keep a clear conscience, the Christian must submit to governing authorities (Rom 13:1).

13:6-7. Shades of Levitical legislation are apparent in Paul's next words. Just as the Levites in Israel were to be supported by the twelve tribes, so governing authorities are to be supported by taxes on the people. Added impetus is given to Paul's words by his change of terms from verse 4. There, God's "servant" is twice designated by *diakonos*, the word which is also used to describe those who minister and serve in the church (e.g., Rom. 16:1; 1 Tim. 4:6). But in verse 6, Paul uses a different word for servant, *leitourgos*, a word used for someone who serves on behalf of another. The former word speaks of the activity, the latter the activity as representing another.

13:8. Paul's words in this section are not as much an exhortation to life within the body of Christ (he touched this in Rom. 12:9-13) as they are a balance to what he has just commanded the church in 13:1-7. Paul's overall emphasis in this chapter is to live submissively as living sacrifices in light of the coming end of the age. Living respectfully toward the king and loving one's fellowman are the two dimensions of every person's public life. If there is a key word in verses 1-7 it is "submit" (vv. 1, 5), which contains within it the range of words such as "honor," "respect," and "obey." When it comes to one's fellowman, Paul draws upon a range of words found in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments given by God to Israel through Moses. He summarizes all those words in the operative word love.

Love (and its attendant synonyms) is the one sanctioned unpaid debt. Indeed, it is a debt that cannot be paid; it is a continuing debt. While it appears that Paul's words are church-related, his use of fellowman seems to broaden the intent of his instruction. In light of the previous verses dealing with society and governance at large, it would seem his focus is still on the wider scope of Christian responsibility. It is not Christian to love fellow church members while hating a pagan neighbor.

13:9. When Christ reduced the Ten Commandments (themselves a summary of the whole moral law) to two, He simplified the process of obeying God for the Pharisees. The Jewish leaders were more interested in the details and particularities of "how" to obey God than in actually obeying God, and reducing the details of the moral law to two simple statements removed their excuses: love God and love your neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40). Paul does the same thing here (not that the Roman believers had been offering excuses that we know of, but just to remind them of how the law had been subsumed under love).

Loving one's neighbor as oneself does not imply a self-focused infatuation with self. Rather, it is a simple way of saying, "Take care of your neighbor with the same natural motivation that you take care of yourself." And who is this neighbor that we are to feed and care for, that we are to love (love here is *agapao*, not *phileo*; the command is to sacrifice oneself, not be merely friendly or affectionate)? It is the person who has a need that I can meet, according to Christ's story in Luke 10:25-27. There, the neighbor was the man who had the resources, not the man in need. But a person who is a neighbor is a person who also has neighbors, so Paul's admonition to love your neighbor is the same as Christ's admonition to be a neighbor who loves.

13:10. In his final word on love, what did Paul have in mind by mentioning harm? Were there incidents of the Christians in Rome acting unkindly toward their Roman neighbors, or toward anyone? Were there reports of unkind relations between members of the church in Rome? Or was Paul simply going back to the source of "love your neighbor" and drawing on the context—which was rich in examples: do not steal, lie, deceive, defraud, rob, hold back wages, curse the deaf or cause the blind to stumble, be unjust, show partiality, slander, endanger, hate, seek revenge, bear a grudge—"but love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:11-18)? The most specific indication that we have as to the motivation for his words is found in the next verse. We are to love our neighbors because the darkness is receding and the light of a new (eschatological) day is dawning.

1 Peter 2:11-25

Peter wrote this letter to several congregations in what is now Turkey. These believers were undergoing persecution. This persecution probably did not come from the authorities but from their neighbors who misunderstood the nature of the Christian faith.

2:11-12. Many false rumors circulated about Christians. They sometimes were accused of weakening families. After all, family stresses did arise when one family member trusted Jesus as Savior and others did not. This stress was particularly acute when a wife trusted Christ and not her husband. Christians in some places were accused of cannibalism. Did they not meet weekly to eat the flesh of a man (misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper)? And others claimed Christians participated in immoral and even incestuous activities (misunderstanding of the "love feast" or fellowship meal that often accompanied the Lord's Supper). Peter reminded these believers they were called to live as those set apart to God's service. Their lives were to exhibit a total transformation from the pagan lifestyle they had known prior to meeting Jesus Christ. If they simply lived so as to reflect the holiness of their Savior and God, they would put all such slanders to rest.

2:13-14. The verb "submit" also can be translated "be subject to" or "rank yourselves under," and normally includes the idea of willful obedience. Believers are commanded to submit to government at all levels. Christians are not permitted the freedom to choose the regulations or officials to which they will submit. Believers are to respect human authorities even if they don't agree with them. Of course, such submission does not include obeying commands that are sinful or contrary to Scripture. The king to whom Peter referred was most likely Nero (A.D. 54-68), the degenerate emperor who cruelly persecuted Christians. In stating that Christians should submit to the king, Peter was focusing on the authority of the office rather than on the character of the officeholder.

2:15-20. Peter first offers an evangelistic reason to respect authorities. Unbelievers are always watching to see whether our behaviors match what we profess. Thus, when Christians are "caught" doing good, the government may commend them. When Christians live as good citizens, their actions will counter false accusations made against them. Such behavior may result in unbelievers being more receptive to the gospel.

But if Christians are mandated to submit to the governing authorities, in what sense have they been "set free" by the gospel? Peter says that Christian liberty is always a responsible freedom—the freedom to choose what is right and good. Believers are to live as free persons, delivered from bondage to sin. Christian liberty is never to be used as a cover-up for evil. Therefore, there is a sense in which Christians are not free at all. They always live as servants of God. The word translated "servants" means "bondslaves," those owned by a master. Here is one of the great paradoxes of Christianity: Only those who have become God's slaves enjoy true freedom. Christian liberty does not mean being free to do only what we want; it means being free to do what we ought to do.

2:21-25. Peter identifies with his suffering audience, reminding them they, like Jesus, have been called to suffer. Suffering because of one's faith is not a probable or possible: It is certain. Just as Christ's suffering led unbelievers to repentance and faith in Jesus, so may the suffering of Christians. Identifying with Jesus' suffering gives purpose and solace to suffering Christians.