

“A Good Citizen” Romans 13

What is that saying? Is it, “You don’t talk about sex, politics and religion?” You don’t mention them around the water cooler at work, at the Thanksgiving Day table with family or even within the church because such conversations never end well. It’s good then we’re **not** talking about those **three** things today. No, we’re just going to be speaking about **two** of them: politics and religion. (We can talk about sex on another day) I can almost hear the conversations after worship during the fellowship time in the foyer.

Although “separated” by a chapter you need to read Romans 12 and 13 together. Remember all those “proverbial truths” or “Christian living tidbits” we heard in Romans 12, well they continue into Romans 13 reminding us that all our relationships are transformed (even how we see government) when our “minds have been renewed.” (12:1) But the tension of Romans 12:14-21 and Romans 13:1-7 is palpable. In Romans 12:14-21, Christians are told to “bless those who persecute you and never pay back evil for evil to anyone - never take vengeance.” It is said in absolute terms. Then comes Romans 13 and its words about God bringing wrath on evildoers via government. How do we reconcile this? Politics is not an easy conversation. I remember someone once telling me after worship when I had used a “political” illustration in a sermon one Sunday morning that he was upset because “church is not about politics”. I guess he had never read Romans 13. It is a challenging passage and one that can easily be abused if misunderstood. “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” (13:1-2) It sounds rather cut and dried in an initial read, don’t you think? So was Paul simply being naïve, as some have said, as he wrote these words? Did he not know about regimes and dictatorship past and present and the atrocities they can commit, sometimes on their own people? Could he not imagine modern day Syria, North Korea or Iran? But then again consider to whom Paul was writing and the Empire that dominated the region where he lived. Let’s not forget Paul was a Roman citizen and it was the Romans who designed the tortuous cross and responsible for those amphitheaters where death was a sport. The Romans were even responsible for putting to death Jesus of Nazareth. So maybe Paul did know a thing or two about despots and dictators. But could Paul have imagined how many could misuse, misquote even misinterpret Romans 13 for their own purposes? Don’t believe me? Consider what Hitler and Nazism did in mid twentieth century Europe. In fact they even convinced many in the German Church to go along with them – even turning in their Jewish neighbours to the Gestapo so they could be “disposed of” in concentration camps and all because of their understanding of passages like Romans 13. And I

haven't even mentioned what some believed to be Biblical affirmation for things like apartheid, residential schools or lawmakers south of the Mason Dixon Line who justified their actions of segregation because of passages like Romans 13 and then tried to convince those under their rule that because their government had been "established by God" everyone was simply to "conform" and be "good citizens."

It's the public school award no kid wants to receive. Top athlete or even Valedictorian are coveted prizes but the "Citizenship Award," who wants that? Do you really want to be known as the kids who got along with all other kids in school and even likes the Vice Principal? Well according to Paul citizenship is not simply an award but a goal, we as Christians, must strive to live out. We have been reminded, even during the past two Sundays that you and I live in community with one another, with those who we may not even know but are called to serve and now the governments who rule over us. In other words we are called to be "good citizens". But what does that actually mean? Well for one thing it means that we must get along with those in authority. Author and Pastor John Stott, for example, lays out four models when it comes to the relationship of church and state or the Christian and government. "The first is *Erastianism* where the state controls the church. Second is a *Theocracy* where the church controls the state. *Constanianism* is a third model where there is a compromise between church and state but the state always favours the church and finally *Partnership* where the church and state recognize each other and they each have God-given responsibilities and encourage and collaborate where possible." The fourth model seems to accord best with Paul's teaching in Romans 13, according to Stott. You and I live in a world that we must live in relationship with (including governments) and Romans 13 helps us "partner" with those in authority for the common good of all peoples. We become voices therefore for the rights of those who have no rights. We speak up for those Jesus cared most about – those who were forgotten. We make sure our governments care from those who are alone and give dignity to those who are imprisoned or aged. We motivate governments to educate our children, provide us with safety and security and care for those even beyond our borders. We submit therefore to the laws of our nation and respect those who govern us, according to Tim Keller, because it is "right, wise and fair." It is far easier to criticize those who serve us, for example on Facebook posts or condemn "certain" parties no matter what they do or say (even if it is good - because you have chosen to support the "other" party) rather than submit or harder still "pray for" those who govern us. We would rather "rebel" and "bring judgment" than "submit." And "the strength of this statement intensifies when we realize Paul was speaking of a non Christian government - the pagan Roman Empire" when he first penned those words (Keller) The Romans Empire was not simply unfriendly to Christian but out and out hostile with them. And yet, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and I believe even us today to submit to those God has given

authority, no matter who they are. These are hard words, confusing words especially when we look at other nations and see how much worse they are being treated in their countries. So maybe there is something else within our passage that is not so evident.

Although governments demand our loyalty (and this is what we think we see in Romans 13) there are hints within Romans 13 that government powers are **not absolute**. Yes, we follow the laws of the land, which is a good Christian act and we cannot complain when we are stopped for speeding on the 404 doing 140kms. These laws are set in place for our protection and the protection of others. We obey the rules and recognize that it is not right to take something that does not belong to us no matter what they are or how much they might cost and when we steal we must face the consequence of those actions. But rule keeping and law abiding is not absolute if we consider at least a couple of verses in our passage. For example in verse 7 we are to give what we owe - taxes (which may bother us) until we face a long stay in a hospital and do not have to take out a second mortgage to pay for it. But we can also rightly assume there are some things government (any government) is not owed. And secondly in verses 3-4 government authorities are considered "God's servants." So as God's servants they are not free to do whatever they want. "In the movie "The Lion King" the young cub and son of the king says, 'I thought being a king meant you can do whatever you want.' His father king Mufasa replies, 'There's more to being a king than that.'" (Keller) These hints therefore also lead us to go to other portions of scripture where submission had its limits.

In Exodus 1 we read of an edict of Pharaoh that attempted to limit the size of Hebrew families. It was Pharaoh's "birth control." To stop the Hebrews from becoming too large and thus too powerful a law arose saying that a generation of Hebrew boys must be eliminated – murdered actually. Pharaoh demanded Hebrew midwives (those helping Hebrew women give birth) kill all baby boys upon the delivery. But the midwives refused to follow this law and allowed all Hebrew children to live. Was God angry they did not submit to the government of the day? Apparently not because the story goes on to say that God "was kind to the midwives" (Ex 1:20) affirming that their "civil disobedience," in this case, was the right thing to do. Much later in Babylon three men by the names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to "bow down" to a golden idol that all Babylon were too worship. (Dan 3:4-6) Because of their act of disobedience they not only broke the law but risked their lives. These three young Hebrews refused to bow down to another god and risked death for the sake of obeying God. And what of Daniel? (Daniel 6:7) Daniel was commanded, along with all of Babylon not to pray to his own God but Daniel refused and chose to worship God. All three stories are reminders that we give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. It's also no different than modern day example like Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Corey Ten Boom or

Rosa Parks. All stood in opposition peacefully, respectfully, and with the grace of God – “clothing themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.” (13:14) So where does this leave us?

Well Jesus was once asked a very similar question. It was, of course, yet another “trap” set for Jesus by the Pharisees or the religious leaders of the day. (Matt 22:15-22) Jesus was considered by many to be a religious fanatic at best and a political rabble-rouser at worst. One way the religious establishment believed they could quickly end Jesus’ ministry was to show that he was against those who governed the region. If Rome somehow felt “threatened” they would simply eliminate the threat. So around a “water cooler” of another sort the Pharisees first placated and then challenged Jesus with what appeared to be a simple question, “Should he pay taxes?” It was a trap of course and not even something that related to Jesus because how can you pay taxes when you make no money and live off the generosity of others. But Jesus takes the challenge and maybe even surprises some in the crowd when he answers the way he does. Now consider the predicament. For Jesus to say, “Pay up” meant he somehow condoned the Empire and their over taxing, especially of the poor. But to say, “No way” meant that Jesus was now an enemy of the state. He was, as usual, in a “no win situation”. But as Jesus always did, he turned the tables so that he could not be condemned by anyone. He asked for a coin. He took the coin and held it for all to see. There, as big as life, was the face of Caesar, who appeared on all currency of the day. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” Jesus told them. Therefore show submission to those who rule over you and give them what is theirs. (Romans 13) **but** understand that Caesar alone is not absolute. Yes “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” but give to God what is God’s.

Governments deserve our support, our respect and even our taxes make no mistake about it. We give to Caesar what is Caesar and as Christians and the church partner with governments for the “common good.” But everything else we give to God. We give our allegiance to God. We stand up unafraid to those who demand otherwise. We give God our honour. We represent him in our homes and in our politics. And we stand up to governments who do not live up to their God-given responsibility. We give to Caesar what is Caesars and God what is God’s for this is what it means to be a good citizen. Let us pray...