

# Written: Romans 13:1-5 “A Christian’s Obedience to Government”

Proper 18-14<sup>th</sup> Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## Text: Romans 13:1-5

<sup>1</sup> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

## Exegetical Statement

Paul has warned the Church not to respond to evil men with evil, but to pray for their enemies and in doing so they can pour shame upon their consciences. The Church and individuals are not to take the law into their own hands but leave vengeance to the LORD. Here Paul describes how God enacts His will for justice and vengeance: through the ruling authorities He has put in place. Paul states that no matter how the authority came to be in power, if it is allowed to rule then it does so by God's consent and for His purposes. He can and does use both good and evil government to fulfill His purposes on earth that are not always discernable to men unless He chooses to reveal them. Therefore those who oppose the ruling authorities (except as commanded by God in His word) are opposing God Himself and can be subjected to judgement. God gives these governing authorities the power of the sword, to enact His vengeance against those who subvert His will. Those who continue to obey God's will through continued obedience to the ruling authorities can enjoy the peace and civil harmony that results when the law is enacted as a curb. Because the ruling authorities are God's servant set in place for our benefit we are beholding to support it with our taxes and any other demands it places on its citizens, including the call to honor and respect it as God's servant. As Christians we have a debt of love that we owe to God and to our fellow man that we will never fulfill this side of eternity. We love God by obeying Him and His call to submit to government, and also in our loving others which we fulfill by obeying the moral codes that are the basis of most laws of civilized society. Loving obedience is our response to this gift from God

## Focus Statement:

Government is God's gift to us His Church as His means to keep the peace and quell civil unrest, so that the Church might have the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel in word and action. He works through the means of broken sinful people who need the Gospel's message of forgiveness just as much as we do.

## Function Statement:

### Why it's important to know:

We can see Paul's words as being applicable only to government and its servants for law and order that meet our qualifications for justice and fairness. Some see examples of injustice and unfairness in these chosen servants and assume that Paul's call for submission is no longer valid

### What the hearer should do as a result:

Hold by faith that God works through even broken sinful people to be His servants to keep law and order. Support obedience to God's chosen servants in their mission to establish law and order. Support efforts to hold accountable all who go above and beyond the law including those chosen servants. Praise and give thanks for those who do their job to protect us daily.

## Subject Sentence: God works through broken men to provide justice

## **Introduction: How people view Government Today**

This is an excerpt from an NPR Report given by Jonathan Levinson on August 27<sup>th</sup> for their afternoon news show All Things Considered:

“On a Saturday night in mid-August, the 79th consecutive day of protests in Portland, Ore., a couple hundred demonstrators gathered in Portland's Laurelhurst Park before marching to the Penumbra Kelly Building, a property used by both the city police and Multnomah County Sheriff's office. As the group marched less than a mile through residential neighborhoods, they chanted slogans such as "No cops! No prisons! Total abolition!" When they arrived at the police building, protesters also played music, and yelled at the police who were positioned in their cars about 100 ft away, in the building's parking lot.

Nightly protests passed their 90th day this week. Over the course of nearly three months, crowd sizes have at times exceeded 10,000 people and on other occasions been fewer than 100. Between May 29 and Aug. 27, the Portland Police Bureau declared 23 riots and 22 unlawful assemblies (that doesn't include nights that started as unlawful assemblies and were later declared riots). But the laws governing those declarations are vague and have roots in Oregon's deeply racist past. Oregon began as a white only state. While it banned slavery at its founding, the state adopted strict Black exclusionary laws which had been in place in the territory for decades. The law banned Black people from living in the state or owning property.

On that mid-August night, in addition to yelling at police, a couple of protesters spray painted the building while others threw water bottles – protesters' weapon of choice from the start. Police said rocks were also thrown. After three hours, a booming announcement came from the bureau's long range acoustic device, or LRAD, a speaker that can broadcast messages at a louder than normal volume. "This is the Portland Police Bureau. We're declaring this a riot," the by-now-familiar announcement came. "You need to leave the area to the west. If you do not leave the area you may be subject to use of force to include crowd control munitions, pepper spray or tear gas." Unfazed, protesters lined up with homemade shields and umbrellas to protect against impact munitions and tear gas. A line of officers in riot gear bull rushed straight into the group, while someone played the "Imperial March" on a loudspeaker. Video from the clash shows a few moments, as police and protesters were engaged in hand to hand combat, the police grabbing at the protesters' shields and swinging their batons.

As you have seen and heard on the nightly news, similar protests have been going on in Seattle Washington, Austin Texas, Arora Colorado, Oakland California, Omaha Nebraska, and Los Angeles. The organizers of these protests blame the violence on the police who cause them to respond violently in order to seek change. They believe that violent protest is the only avenue left to enact the change they seek. They say this unrest and violent protest will continue until the police departments as we know it are defunded and disbanded.

Question: What might God have to say about this? How should we view these protests and the police reaction in light of the examples of racial injustice in the past, as well as what God's Word has to say to us this day? What should our message as God's chosen people, the Church, be in word and action to what is going on?

## **What Paul is saying about Our Obedience to Government**

In our Epistle Lesson today we hear Paul speaking by the direction and power of the Holy Spirit addressing this very matter in Romans **13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.** Now some would read this and say that Paul was writing this in a different time and place, and that his words don't apply to what is happening today. So what was the situation when Paul wrote this?

While Paul doesn't give us a lot of clues as to the time and place where he wrote this letter, many Biblical scholars point out that the content of the letter demonstrates that he has not yet visited the city. He doesn't mention his arrest or incarceration that occurred after he returned to Jerusalem at the end of his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey. He does express the desire to visit Rome after he delivers the offering for the poor in Jerusalem that he collected on his Missionary Journey. After his visit with them he is looking forward to being sent on further west to share the Gospel. So scholars guess he could have written it in Corinth on his way back to Jerusalem. Now the governing authority in Paul's day was the Roman Emperor Nero. At this point most believe Nero had not yet begun his brutal persecution of Christians, but when he did one of his victims would be the Apostle Paul. Paul had already experienced injustice and persecution at the hands of local Roman officials in several cities he had visited where he had been beaten, threatened, and even jailed. And even though he could not see how and where his life would end, the Holy Spirit knew these details. And still He moved Paul to write these words we have before us. That makes them applicable to us today too.

God's word says to us: "Let every person: believer and unbeliever alike, no matter what race you are, what political party you belong to; every person must consider himself or herself a subject of the governing authority. They must submit themselves to the authority of those who rule over them. By using the general term "governing authorities" The Lord is being all inclusive. He is not saying that this applies only to those leaders who have been elected in a democratic election, or are members of our political party, or whose philosophy or religious affiliation matches ours. He is saying that no matter how they achieved their office they have been placed there by the authority of God Himself. There is no higher authority in the universe than the LORD God, and all things are subject to His will. This applies not just to a Federal Democratic Republic such as the United States, but it also to nations ruled by Kings, Dictatorships where a man is placed in power by a military coup, as well as Socialist and Communist Governments. If this were a Bible Study, we might take the time to talk about how this could be looking at all the examples throughout our

history of abusive governments. But I think we have enough on our plate right now applying this to our situation here today.

Those who support violent protests cite examples of police brutality that display racial injustice and intolerance. And we would have to admit that these examples do happen. But we must remember our God works through means in this world. He loves to work through everyday broken sinful means to better display His power and glory. Paul talked about this earlier in **Romans 9:20-23** <sup>20</sup> **But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"** <sup>21</sup> **Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?** <sup>22</sup> **What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,** <sup>23</sup> **in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory---**" Should we allow a few instances of broken sinfulness among those called to keep the peace as invalidating God's word? Are you and I not broken sinful means that God uses to proclaim His saving grace to the world? Our sin does not invalidate God's call for all to believe in His Son, or our mission to share the Gospel Message with the world. So the sinfulness of a few should not invalidate God's truth that all those in authority have been placed there by God.

God works through His means in ways we often cannot understand. **Isaiah 55:8-9** <sup>8</sup> **For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.** <sup>9</sup> **For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.** Because His word testifies to us that He is at work in our government and its servants appointed to keep the peace, we should hold this to be true even when it doesn't look like it. The sinfulness of man cannot keep God's will and plan from being accomplished. People tend to view what's going on and judge things according to their own human wisdom and understanding. But the problem with human wisdom is that it has been tainted and spoiled by the sin we inherited from Adam. We cannot know and therefore judge God's wisdom and will unless He reveals it to us; otherwise it is beyond our knowing. He used sinful broken leaders in both the Jewish ruling council and the Roman governor to carry out the death sentence on the only innocent sinless man that ever lived. At the time it appeared to be the greatest travesty of justice. But it was God at work to bring forgiveness and salvation to all men; even those who arranged for Jesus death. Therefore we hold that God's Word set before us today is true. Even when it doesn't look like it. God is always at work to accomplish His will through His chosen means.

**Romans 13:2** **Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.** Our government officials operate under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ who sits at the right hand of the Father ruling all things. He is working through those servants appointed by His chosen governmental authorities to enforce the laws of the land and keep the peace. These means are what we call our local, state, and federal police force, National Guard, and even the Military. God's

clear words to us today are: those who oppose this authority are in fact opposing God Himself. And those who oppose God will incur His judgment, if not in this world then in the next. Those who feel they are justified in active violent protest and disobedience against police because of incidents of racial injustice do not have a leg to stand on according to God's word.

Paul goes on to say in **Romans 13:3-4** <sup>3</sup> **For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.** In general we see this as the truth today. Those who abide by the law, and work within the means provided by our government to enact change through lawful and peaceful protest, and support of electing candidates who promise change, are blessed with peace and security. Those who support the hard work that our police force engages in generally enjoy peace and security. But those that choose to oppose God's designated authority on earth will find themselves under judgment.

Now this judgment should not come at the hands of individual citizens, especially Christians to whom Paul had warned in **Romans 12: 19-21** <sup>19</sup> **Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."** <sup>20</sup> **To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."** <sup>21</sup> **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** Vigilantism has no place in the life of a Christian. The Lord will repay evil doers on the Last Day when they will begin the eternal suffering they earned in this life. But He also enacts vengeance now and does so through those servants He has appointed to keep the peace. Those who protest police brutality and injustice today should be thankful they didn't live in Paul's day. The Roman Soldier was charged with keeping the peace. Anyone who violated his order to cease and desist and disperse was not allowed to protest further, was not allowed to keep chanting and throw objects at him, was not even wrestled down and arrested. The Roman Soldier was authorized to draw his sword and beginning killing until peace was restored.

### **God's Purpose for Government: Keep the Peace for the Gospel**

God's purpose for government then is the same as it is today. It's not to create heaven on earth where racial injustice and corrupt politicians are a thing of the past. This remains a fallen and broken sinful world. Government is not the means by which God will restore the perfection that existed before the Fall. And we as the Church should not look for it to do so. God's purpose in appointing government is to keep the peace so that we, His Church, can proclaim the Gospel.

Jesus came to be the means by which God's justice and vengeance against sin was brought together with His desire to be loving and merciful to His fallen creation, to fallen sinful people like you and me. Jesus suffered injustice at the hands of government officials not for His own sinfulness, but for yours, and mine, and even those who support the violent protests today. He does not want us to work at creating a perfect utopia on this earth where crime and injustice are a thing of the past. That is not part of our call as the Church. That is not His will and plan for this world. He wants us to hold fast to His Son through whom we are remade into people good enough for the world to come, the place where injustice, and racial division is a thing of the past, something that is no longer even remembered. He wants us to build up one another in the faith that holds Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Because that faith is the key to opening the door to eternal life for all who hear and believe. And He provides for us a government run and operated through broken and sinful individuals which provides the law and order-the peace needed-for us to share that faith with those around us.

Yesterday we let one of our neighbors from the Maple Park Terrace Apartments next door have a graduation party in the Church's Pavilion for their daughter. Everything went fine until around 9:00 PM in the evening a man who they didn't know came strolling through and decided to join the mother who was watching the fire. He came with a couple of 22 oz cans of beer. When she asked him to leave, he refused, telling her at one point that he was the Pastor. She called me and I went out. I told him who I was, that this was private property, and that he needed to leave. I told him the consumption of alcohol is not allowed on the property. He tried to start an argument about how Jesus drank wine, and that we use wine in worship, but I told him we were not going to argue theology tonight. I repeated "this is private property, and I'm asking you to leave." He left walked across the Maple Avenue to the other side. I thought he was gone. But from the shadows of the buildings across the street he began to yell obscenities at Susan. We called the police who confronted him and told him to go home. Instead he walked back across the street back toward the party store. They told me because he did not comply with their request, they would go make contact with Him again.

## **Conclusion**

I don't know how the LORD is going to work this out in the lives of all involved. I don't know what will happen with that man, but I prayed for him. I prayed that the Lord would use this night as an opportunity for him to get the help he needs. I pray the mother of the graduate got to see the police as God's agent to protect and serve. And I got to thank the Metro Police Officers who showed up for their service on behalf of us here. When I told one of them that the reading for the message today was Romans 13 and God's command that we submit to authority he laughed. But I am thankful for how God used them to keep the peace in my life. I pray He continues to use them in our lives as a Church so that we can continue to proclaim the love of Christ.

God is always at work through His designated means to accomplish His will and plan. His will and plan is not to create the perfect utopia in this world where racial injustice and corruption in the police force no longer exists. In this broken sinful world we will always have things like this to deal with. But as Christians we are called to support the government God has put in place over us. We are called to be obedient to His servants sent out to enforce the laws meant to keep the peace. We are to pray and support those police officers that do their job to the best of their ability. We are to call for accountability according to the law for all who violate the laws they are supposed to uphold. We pray the LORD would continue to bless this place with peace so that we may continue to build one another up in faith toward Christ and be equipped to share that faith with our neighbors and friends. Amen.