

21st Sunday after Pentecost
October 22, 2023
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Godly Government

Romans 13:1-7 (EHV)

Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God. ²Therefore the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God's institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves.

³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to evil. Would you like to have no fear of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will receive praise from him, ⁴because he is God's servant for your benefit. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because he does not carry the sword without reason. He is God's servant, a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience.

⁶For this reason you also pay taxes, because the authorities are God's ministers, who are employed to do this very thing. ⁷Pay what you owe to all of them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed.

Dear friends in Christ,

What is a godly government? Is the government considered godly only if a Christian is president, king, chief or prime minister? Is the government godly only if the leader belongs to the "right" political party? Is the government godly only if the leaders enact laws according to the Word of God? The answer to these types of questions depends on what one means by godly.

For God has established all the authorities that exist. In this way, every government is godly because it has been established by God. On the other hand, no government is perfectly godly because every government is ruled by and rules over sinful people. This means that a government established by God is still capable of great evil because of the sinful people in charge. As believers, we need to remember this because we would like to use the evil of government leaders as a reason to get out of what Paul tells us to do in Romans 13. We are to submit, do what is good, pay taxes and give the governing authorities honor and respect.

But our sinful nature often takes control, and we ridicule the authorities God has established. We openly mock them and treat them with total disdain. Those in the "wrong" political party become the enemies and we feel free to post hate filled words on social media and speak those words in public and private conversations. We might justify our dishonor because that leader lives an openly immoral life and treats others horribly. That leader promotes unbiblical ideas. That leader has the wrong tax policy and that one is wrong on immigration and foreign policy. Therefore, I don't need to submit to that authority. I don't need to show respect to that leader. I will only honor those I deem worthy of honor. He's not my president. She's not my governor.

This kind of thinking makes a lot of sense. The problem is that God directly tells us that this way of thinking is completely wrong. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther's explanation of the Fourth Commandment summarizes what God expects of us in relation to authorities he established: "We should fear and love God that we do not dishonor or anger our parents and others in authority but

honor, serve and obey them and give them love and respect.” And Paul clearly tells us that this applies to everyone and to every governing authority:

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The highest governing authority when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans was likely Emperor Nero. He was not a moral man or a kind man. He set fire to Rome and blamed the Christians. He is likely the emperor to order the execution of Paul himself. Yet, Paul writes to the believers in the capital city of Rome, to submit to the governing authorities, to pay taxes and give honor and respect. No exceptions for the bad behavior of the ruler. We see this also in the lesson from Daniel this morning. Daniel and his three friends were living under the government of a king of Judah in Jerusalem until they were teens. The king of Babylon invaded and took them as captives. But not one of the four rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Not one claimed that Nebuchadnezzar was not their king. Instead, they all served their new king with honor and served even better than others in the kingdom. Daniel would live long enough to serve yet another kingdom when the Medes and Persians overthrew Babylon.

Read through the first six chapters of Daniel this week and notice how many times Daniel and his three friends rebelled against the unbelieving kings they served. Notice how many times they complained about their situation. Notice how many times they bad mouthed the king. I’ll give you a clue. It is zero. These four Jewish men served admirably under kings who did not believe in the true God. They are a wonderful example of what Paul encourages all believers to do:

³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to evil. Would you like to have no fear of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will receive praise from him, ⁴because he is God’s servant for your benefit. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because he does not carry the sword without reason. He is God’s servant, a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience.

Daniel and his friends did what was good and honored their governing authorities because of conscience. For they had a higher authority than any king or emperor. God rules over all and they trusted that God was ruling over Judah, Babylon and Persia. When God saw fit to replace one kingdom with another, he did. These believers continued to serve their God and their neighbor and let God worry about controlling the events of world history.

It might be more difficult to do this today than for believers in the past. For most believers in history lived under kings, emperors and dictators of one kind or another. It is only very recently in human history that concepts like freedom and rights and voting to elect the governing authorities existed. This ability to elect our own authorities is a great blessing but can also make it difficult to submit to, honor and respect the authorities. The ability to vote also makes us think that we have more control over what happens in the future than is actually true. Those running for office want us to think that if we elect the other candidate, the world is going to end. War will break out everywhere. The economy will completely collapse. Schools will all shut down. Everyone will lose healthcare. Only by electing the right candidate can you save our state, our city, our nation, our way of life. And then as believers, we get to thinking that we have to get the right person elected so that the kingdom of God can

advance. We've got to make this nation a Christian nation again. It is almost like we think that if we don't elect the right people, God's plan of salvation will be delayed or stopped. But that is foolish if we really think about it.

Don't misunderstand me. Christians should vote. But don't think we are going to make the kingdom of God grow by our vote. God established the governing authorities and uses the governments of this world to accomplish his purposes. Nebuchadnezzar was acting in his own interests when he captured Daniel and his friends and when he destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. He was acting in his own interests when he promoted Daniel and his friends because they were wonderful servants. But God was in control, putting Daniel in a position of authority in Babylon and later in Persia. God was preserving his people in captivity. Caesar Augustus was acting in his own interest when he called for a census of his empire. God used his decree to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem so the Christ would be born in Bethlehem as promised in Micah. The Herod family was full of murderers and tyrants, but God revealed the Savior under the reigns of this wicked family of kings. Pilate was acting in his own interests when ordering Jesus to be crucified but God was in control, carrying out the salvation of the world through the death of Christ. Every governing authority is godly in this sense – that God has established the government authorities and God is always in control to accomplish his plans and purposes.

Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Yet, Jesus humbled himself and submitted himself to Herod and Pilate and even the Sanhedrin and High Priest. His obedience to the governing authorities covers our disobedience and dishonor. His suffering and death cover the guilt of our sins against those God has established as authorities. Jesus did this to save us and to leave us an example to follow. Out of love for Christ and because we trust that God ruling over all the governments of the world, we will seek to do what Paul tells us in Romans 13.

Do you think non-Christians would notice if Christians submitted to the governing authorities with honor and respect? The unbelievers around Daniel and his friends noticed how faithfully those four Jews served a foreign king. People will notice when you show respect to those in authority, especially towards those you disagree with. It is fine to disagree on policies. It is necessary for Christians to refuse to go along with anything against the clear Word of God. But we do not have to be angry and rude and obnoxious about it. Daniel was willing to go to the lion's den instead of obeying the king's order to stop praying to the Lord. The other three were willing to go to the fiery furnace instead of bowing down to the king's statue. They obeyed a higher authority, but they did not rebel against their earthly king who was directly opposing God's Word.

If we also honor and respect the governing authorities, we are showing our trust in the God who established them. And that is our purpose in life, to give glory to the Lord our God. The Lord's great desire is for all people to repent and believe in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Getting the right person in the White House or Congress will not make that happen. Christians talking about Jesus is the way God uses to bring others to faith in Christ. It is really difficult to talk about Jesus when we are badmouthing political leaders. Paul urges us to submit, to pay our taxes and to show honor and respect. In this way we are honoring our God who established the authorities and loving our neighbors by wanting them to be in heaven with us through faith in Christ.

Amen.