

Romans 13

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[0 : 00] I'd like you to turn now to the letter to the Romans, the chapter which we read from that epistle, chapter 13, and the last phrase of the first verse.

The authorities that exist have been established by God. Now, the letter to the Romans is noted as a kind of Christian manifesto.

What we have here from the Apostle Paul is a systematic articulation of the good news of Jesus Christ. And it comes as a surprise to many people to find this chapter, half of which deals with the political situation of the time, indeed of all times.

Some people today who take a cynical view of politics, many people take a cynical view of politics, and who feel that politics and religion don't mix.

Now, if Paul were here, I'm sure he would disagree with that. Paul is urging us here to recognize that political authority exists by God's appointment, and that we have a responsibility to play our part in the wider government of society.

[1 : 26] Now, Paul did not live in a democracy. Paul lived in the Roman Empire, which was in many ways a dictatorship. And yet, he still recognized that in these situations, the ruler, the government, had divine authority.

Now, Paul would not encourage us, I think, to identify with any one political party.

The church is not a political lobby in general terms. But nevertheless, the church does have a responsibility to highlight the moral, spiritual issues which are at stake in our society.

The leaders of the church are not called upon to be political agitators. And yet, no Christian can divorce consistently his faith or her faith from their politics.

And so, we are called to formulate our political and social ideals out of the word of God, so that when we address a question of, for example, who to vote for next Thursday, that we come to our decision, not simply in the light of our prejudices, on the light of our traditions, but in the light of God's word and how we believe his spirit is leading us at this particular point of time.

[3 : 10] Now, we recognize, of course, that in political issues, there are issues which are in many ways independent of the scriptures.

Some people might be more right-wing, other people may be more left-wing, some people might be more down the center. But, so, I don't think we can hijack any political position and say that is a Christian position.

Rather, we seek to infuse the particular political position that we have come to, to infuse that position with scripture, and to seek to be a leaven, which will extend Christian influence, to be the salt of the earth, as Jesus himself has told us.

Now, in these seven verses of chapter 13 of the letter to the Romans, Paul says a great deal to us about an election, about whether it's a local election or a national election, as we face this coming Thursday.

He refers here to the governing authorities, to rulers, and there are lessons which I believe are important for us to put into practice when we do have an opportunity to express our mind politically.

[4 : 40] We are called upon not simply to be church members, but to be citizens. And we have a God-given responsibility to fulfill that role.

There are two things, I think, that the scriptures say here. First of all, the scriptures speak about government, or governing bodies, or governing authorities.

And secondly, Paul offers advice to those who are governed. So there's the government on the one hand, and there's the governed on the other. There's those who are elected to office, who serve in office, and those who live simply as citizens.

So first of all, just let us think tonight of what Paul says here about government, or governors, of ministers, of members of parliament, of local authority, councillors.

Now the first thing that Paul says is that when people are in this position, they have been established by God.

[5 : 56] So in ancient Rome, it wasn't Caesar who decreed who should be the governor of such and such a province. In a sense that was true, of course, but although Caesar had done that, that person had, in a sense, divine authority.

And Paul is saying that we need to recognise that. The governing authorities, he says, are appointed by God. Now in the Scottish Parliament, it used to be the case, when it existed previously, that every session of the parliament was opened with the singing of a psalm. When the parliament was restarted in 1999, I think it was, it was opened with the singing of the hundredth psalm, with which we opened our service tonight.

So in the Westminster Parliament, there are daily prayers which are said. Sadly, the Scottish Parliament doesn't follow that precedent. It does have weekly time for reflection.

But it is not an exclusively Christian focus. And I think Paul is urging us here to pray for those who are in authority.

[7 : 13] He is urging us to recognise that there is a, they have a divine authority, and that therefore we need to respect them, and to pray for them. Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

And so I think if Paul were in Scotland on Friday, when the results of the election are declared, he would say to whoever, maybe first minister, you've been elected by the people of Scotland, but it is really God who has put you here.

He would say to the provost, or the convener, of every local authority, God has given you this privilege.

God has given you this power, this authority. And he would urge them to honour God in the public square. He would urge them to recognise and to acknowledge that God is their Lord.

I think it's important for us to remember that although God has placed authorities in the position of power, nevertheless it is not, therefore it is not their right to do whatever they wish.

[8 : 48] Some of the people who adhered most strongly to what Paul says here about civil authority being divinely authorised or divinely established have also been those who have opposed these civil authorities when they departed from what God had not ordained.

The civil authorities are established by God, but if they depart from what God has established, then I think we have the right to oppose them. Now we exercise that right into democracy by voting them out of office or seeking to vote them out of office if that's the way we feel.

But in many societies in the world there is no democracy and it's a very difficult situation for Christians. It's the kind of situation that obtained during the Stuart period in our own history.

The Stuarts believed in the divine right of kings and it was the Christian community that opposed the divine right of kings and they emphasised that it was in the fact that the authorities were divinely established did not allow the authorities to take the law into their own hands.

Samuel Rutherford who was one of the Covenanters he ministered in the Parish of Anwar on the Solway Firth and was later a professor in the University of St Andrews published in 1644 a book on constitutional law called *Lex Rex* and I understand that this is the only Scottish book on the subject to gain international distinction.

[10 : 35] *Lex Rex* the Latin for simply the law is king. Now what the kings in these days believed was the king was the law. And Rutherford says no.

He says the law is king. The king the ruler is under the law. And I think it's important for us to recognise that that Paul is here not encouraging us to submit willy-nilly to ruthless dictators.

John Knox himself believed in what he called the just rebellion. He went back to passages in the Old Testament including those which we read earlier to argue that the people had a right to overthrow an unjust or an ungodly ruler.

In fact he said that if you do not overthrow an unjust and ungodly ruler God will bring judgment upon you. And so we have a responsibility he says to vote out of office those who are ungodly.

Those who do not live and who do not pass laws in accordance with the word of God. And if we fail to attempt to do that Knox would say then we bring a judgment upon ourselves.

[11 : 57] God cares about society. God is interested not only in the church God is also interested in the wider society.

And it wasn't the basis of the passages such as those which we read concerning the people's choice of Saul and David. Both were chosen by the Lord but they were also affirmed or reaffirmed by the people.

And we read in both in these passages how both of them were in one sense affirmed by the people. And on the basis of such passages Rutherford in his book *Lex Rex* argues that people have the right and indeed the duty to withdraw the power to govern in the event of rulers failing to govern for the public good.

This type of thinking has made a major contribution to the development of democracy in the Western world. And I think it's important for us to remember that especially in an age today when because of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism people are saying religion must be kept out of politics.

If you keep the Bible out of politics you will lose democracy. I think that one can argue if we look back in history that it was especially in the Western world it was the influence of the scriptures that helped to establish the democratic tradition which we enjoy today.

[13 : 40] So I think that if Samuel Rutherford were here on Friday and he were to confront those who emerged victorious in the coming election he would say to them God has used the people of Scotland he's used the people of Aberdeenshire to elect you and to give you this privilege to govern them and he would remind them that they are urged that he wants them to govern in his name.

But Paul says not only that the authorities have been established by God but that the governor or the government is God's servant.

He says this three times twice in verse 4 and once in verse 6. And it's important I think for us to remind our political masters that they are our servants and God's servants.

One of the advantages of democracy is that it can bring change because the longer sometimes people enjoy a powerful position the more power seems to go to their head.

That's the kind of people we are. It's part of our sinful nature and we probably would all find ourselves doing that if we were in their position.

[15 : 07] So we can't be patronizing about it. We can't be proud about it. But I do think it's an important element that we need to remind politicians of.

Now as the servant of God someone who exercises civic authority is charged to promote what is good and to prevent what is evil.

And it's as simple as that to promote the good and to prevent the evil. Look at the beginning of verse 4. For he is God's servant to do you good.

That's important. It's important that those who govern do us good. Now by doing us good I think Paul is referring to honouring God's standards and honouring God's values.

He's not simply thinking of giving us lots of goodies. He's thinking of working for the public good.

Now one of the problems that we face in the western world today is that the whole concept of public good is diminishing.

[16 : 21] The BBC ran a series of programs just a few weeks ago called *The Trap* in which it demonstrated how the thinking that has been bought into by successive governments in this country of both governing parties excludes the concept of public good and replaces it with selfishness and that you promote yourself you enter public life to promote yourself and this philosophy has been brought into ministries the argument in the program has been brought into the health service it's been brought into the civil service and the whole concept of public good has been undermined and sabotaged by this selfish philosophy and I believe that if this is the case and I think there's evidence that it might well be the case then we need to remind those who are in authority that they are committed to the public good in terms of the scriptures and that we need to do all that we can to re-establish the concept of public good in our society and if we have an opportunity to speak with people who canvass for our votes then this perhaps is an issue that we need to raise with them and ask them what is their concept of the public good what do they mean when they say

I'm sure they would acknowledge that they serve the public good but what does it mean we need to press them we need to recognize this so often today politicians see his or her task as making people happy this of course is the influence I suppose I suspect of the humanist philosophy that has

infiltrated so much of our public life happiness has become an end in itself but in natural fact happiness is not an end product it's a byproduct if you pursue happiness for its own sake you will almost certainly fail to achieve it but if you pursue what is good then happiness as a byproduct will come and happiness as a byproduct it's not an end product and that's an emphasis I believe that as Christians we need to make again and again today and so those who are in authority have got this responsibility to promote what is good they've also got a responsibility to prevent what is evil in the second part of verse four we see that for if you do wrong be afraid for he does not bear the sword for nothing he is

God's servant to bring punishment on the wrongdoers the old translation says there is an inbuilt self destruct tendency in human society which the bible calls sin this is the urge to exploit other people to abandon the public good to hurt others in order to advance ourselves to care only for one's own happiness and security this is a factor in a sinful world and those who are called to exercise public office are called to resist this to resist this tendency to promote oneself this tendency towards selfishness this tendency towards wrongdoing so restraints are necessary in society just as speed limits are necessary in our streets so we need restraints in society and there is a part of government is to restrain as well as promote what is good to restrain what is evil and so it is important that we pray for the new authority new government the new authorities as they take over at the end of this week that they may indeed be given the strength and the courage and to be faithful to promote what is good and right and to restrain what is evil and in this way to fulfil the mandate that they have received not only from the people but also from God but Paul speaks here not only of governors he speaks also of those who are governed he speaks about citizens as well as rulers there are various responsibilities that we have as citizens the first is we're to honour and respect those who govern us we see that in the beginning of verse 7 give everything that you owe him that is the person the governing authority we're to honour and respect them

God has placed them over us as we've also seen now we live in an age of apathy and of cynicism about politics and politicians politicians have become the butt of jokes that if we take that seriously and we become truly cynical then we're betraying what Paul is saying here John Calvin has a section in his institutes on the role of the magistrate or the politician and he underlines how high that calling is he said this is not a low calling as we popularly think of politicians it's a high calling and he emphasises the highness of the calling and perhaps we need to remind our politicians of that perhaps we need to emphasize this when we write to the newspapers when we speak to people being to be a politician is one of the highest callings according to one of the highest callings in human society and we ought not to do it down we ought not to denigrate it we need rather to uplift it and to exalt it and to rescue to redeem it from the bad and evil reputation that it tends to have today and so we need to respect those who exercise authority over us think

Paul also says here that we are to pay our taxes we see that also in verse 7 we are to pay what we owe them remember when Jesus was asked whether the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar or not he said render to Caesar the things that are to Caesar and to God the things that are God's we do this willingly not grudgingly not because of fear but out of conscience and that we will be accountable for tax dodging at the end of the day and God is emphasizing here we may feel that the tax may be unjust that we need to nevertheless respect the right of those who govern to levy that tax I think Paul also says that as citizens we have a duty to do what is right we see this in verse 3 then at the end of verse 3 then do what is right and he will commend you we are to do what is right now

[24 : 21] I think when Paul speaks about what is right he is also using the same sense when he speaks about the good all that is required as one person said for evil to flourish is that good people do nothing and it's so easy for us to opt out and to say well there's nothing we can do but Paul is urging us here yet no there is something you can do you should do right just as the authorities are to do good so the citizens are to do right and he says that we have a responsibility here to do what is right and it is as we take this responsibility seriously that by the grace of God the Christian community can change the tone of any society Thomas Chambers the great church leader in the first half of the 19th century went from the rural parish of

Kilmeny and Fife to Glasgow which was then drawing by leaps and bounds as a result of the industrial revolution there was a huge amount of poverty a great deal of injustice and corruption and Chambers sat about there to work among the poor it wasn't easy for him to do that he was in many ways a bourgeois he was very much much more inclined towards the upper classes and the lower

classes but he believed that God had given him this calling and some years ago I read a book on Chambers and the verdict of that historian on the Chambers life was that he had changed the tone of the city of Glasgow and the structures remained much the same but he changed the tone now all of us are an opportunity to change the tone and God has called us to be the salt of the earth and it is as we supply salt to food that it gives food its taste and so we're called to be the salt of society to change the tone of the community in which we live he also calls us to obey the law to live under the law to recognize that we're not above the law that we are to respect the law because the authorities that have promulgated the law have God's authority behind them and so we will have an opportunity this week to fulfill our citizenship and I would urge all of you to vote according to your conscience it's not for me or any other preacher to tell you how to vote to tell you which party to vote for but I do have a responsibility and every preacher has a responsibility to tell you to exercise your civic duty in a

Christian way and you will have an opportunity to do that we don't often get the opportunity but we will have that opportunity on Thursday and I would urge all of you to exercise take advantage of this opportunity but as you do that to pray and to reflect upon what Paul says here and what the scriptures say in general so that you may be able to answer before God for your vote that you may be able to give an account to him that you've taken seriously what he says here in Romans chapter 13 and let you recognize that God wants politics to be healthy and to be clean and God has a place for the magistrate a place for the politician in his sovereignty of the world and I would urge you to do this and having done it to exercise the privilege and the right that we have in a democratic society next Thursday may God lead all of us and may we see our country becoming a better place as a result of these elections