

Romans 13:1

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[0 : 00] We shall turn now to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans and chapter 13, reading from verse 1.

Romans chapter 13 and verse 1. Let every soul be subject to the higher powers, for there is no power but of God.

The powers that be are ordained of God. Now the Bible brings before us the fact that there are in human society three great divine institutions.

There is first of all the family appointed by God. And there is a great deal of teaching in Holy Scripture with regard to our family responsibilities and our domestic obligations.

And our teaching forms in fact a major part of the Christian ethic. And then we have secondly the institution of the church, the ecclesia.

[1 : 41] Again, a divine institution appointed by God and equally embraced by many of the great principles of the Christian ethic.

We have many, many passages in which God indicates to us our obligations within the church of Jesus Christ.

And then thirdly, we have the state. Again, a divine institution. And yet, in a curious way, Christians seem reluctant to give very much attention to the ethical problems which cluster around relations with the state.

In actual fact, it is often enough to silence a person to say that he is being political.

It is assumed that to be political is to be, if not anti-Christian, it is to be sub-Christian. And yet, if we pause for a moment, we'll find that that response is surely totally absurd.

[3 : 11] The state, the policy, the city, politics, these, like the family and the church, are a divine institution.

And just as God's will and God's teaching embraces the family and the church, so it must embrace our relations within and our obligations to the state.

We find, in fact, that the Apostle Paul in this chapter is simply working out the principle in detail of ascertaining what is the good, unacceptable, and perfect will of God.

I'm taking you back there to Romans 12 and verse 2. Now, God's will, that which is good and acceptable and perfect, embraces domestic principles.

It also embraces ecclesiastical principles. But it no less embraces political principles. Because the state, the whole political framework, is itself God's appointment.

[4 : 37] And God has given us in his own word guidance as to the fundamental principles that must govern us within this particular framework.

And I want tonight for a moment to look at this passage, Romans 13, verses 1 down to verse 6. Because it is the single fullest passage that bears upon this whole complex of problems.

I'm saying in my own defense that it is a legitimate part of the word of God. It's part of God. It's part of God's revelation.

It is as much part of the Bible as the part we discussed this morning. It affects a very important area of our own discipleship.

And we must have to make some conscience of trying to understand it. I want to ask, first of all, what does the apostle tell us with regard to the nature of the state?

[5 : 49] What does he say about the civil power? What does he tell us about the whole political system? He tells us, first of all, that the powers that be are ordained by God.

The powers that be, the existing authorities. The government as it actually was in Paul's own day. Now that government wasn't a democracy. It wasn't in many ways an admirable, maybe not even a tolerable form of government.

And yet the apostle is saying that that government, the powers that be, they are there functioning, exercising authority by divine appointment.

There is a principle there that flies in the face of a great deal of political philosophy. The apostle does not say to us that the system of politics took its origin in some kind of social contract.

[7 : 10] He is not saying that government came about by simply the consent of the governed. He is saying it is a divine ordinance.

The existing political framework. And at this time, it was imperial Roman power. It was in many ways evil.

It was certainly very far from perfect. And yet Paul says of it, it was ordained by God. Now let's bear in mind always this.

That God for us is not simply some kind of obstruction. He is not the unknown God. He is not the God of polytheism or of pagan conception.

He is always the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, God is always the thine God.

[8 : 15] And for me, God is always God in Christ. God is Christ. Christ is God. God is the only one. In other words, I am saying that the powers that be have been ordained by Jesus Christ.

That is by God the Savior. By the God of love and by the God of grace. God is the only one. That is by God. Now there have been, and I think there still are, in the Orthodox Christian Church, those who would say to us that government comes from God absolutely and not from God considered redemptively.

Now bear with me for a moment. That is in some ways a valid distinction. I can't in my mind distinguish from God in his absolute creative sovereignty and God in his grace as a redeemer. I can make that distinction logically. But I cannot go so far as to say that these are two separate gods. In other words, I do not now know of a God who is creator but is not redeemer.

I do not know of a God who is not Jesus Christ. And I do not know of a Jesus Christ who is not mediator.

[9 : 50] Or of a Christ who is not redeemer. Or of a Christ who is not gracious. Who is not loving and merciful. Christ, the redeemer, is the only God there is.

And I agree with all my heart that government is not an ordinance of God absolutely. It is an ordinance of God the redeemer.

It's an ordinance of the God of grace. An ordinance of the God of redemption. It has been instituted by God.

It is concerned for a race. It is subject to God the redeemer and to God the savior. In other words, I have said before, recently, that in Christ all things are ours.

Because all things are Christ's. All the authority is Christ's. And I most emphatically conceive of government as something which Christ has set up.

[11 : 01] Has set up in grace. Has set up for the purposes of grace. I believe that all the political movements of the world are subordinate to Christ's determination to save.

And I believe, therefore, that government must be seen within the context of God's commitment in Christ to the salvation of the world.

Christ has set up. And to Christ it is answerable. We are told here that it is the minister of God in verse 4.

It is God's servant. It is not something which has an independent existence so that it can lay down its own rules and define its own program and its own goals.

It is a servant. Responsible to God. Answerable to God. And in the last analysis, dischargeable by God.

[12 : 13] The very fact that the government is God's makes every government provisional.

Because when the system provokes God, when the system comes to be of no use to God, when it comes to contradict God's glory and God's purpose, then God dispenses with it.

The very basis of Paul's thought is that government, the whole political system, is a divine institution. And not only divine, but one set up by Christ the mediator.

One subject to his control. One answerable to him. And one that is working out the precise purpose that he has determined.

The second point I extract is this. That government has been ordained by God for good. Now I take you again to verse 4.

He has submitted to God to thee for good. The ruler is God's servant. But into that, Paul builds two great statements.

[13 : 30] He is God's servant to thee. Now I'm not sure if I quite see this. But I say what I see. The apostle is saying to us that government is God's servant for my good.

For my benefit. And it's very interesting that Paul does not say you in the plural. He says thee in the singular.

And he's suggesting to us that God has regard to the good of the particular Christian in setting up government in the abstract in general and a particular form of government in any specific time or place.

He is God's servant for you. Now I do believe that in all that God does he has regard to the well-being of his own people.

And I see in scripture that that is always so particular and so personal. He loved me. He gave himself for me.

[14 : 50] And if I take that mighty principle and illuminate this almost hidden statement in Romans 12 Romans 13 4 He is God's servant for thee.

I'm up against this mighty fact that the political system of the land in which I live is God's servant for me.

God set it up for me. And I believe even further that taking government on a worldwide scale the whole aggregate of political systems that God in his disposal of these affairs and of those events is still looking at me.

In other words we have this tremendous fact that when God decrees and God enacts he is always looking at me.

He is always looking at his own family. We can deduce that quite simply from the fact of adoption. We are God's children.

[16 : 09] Now in our own families every decision that parents take will be taken in the light of its bearing upon each one of our children.

If I contemplate for example emigrating if I contemplate a new sphere of ministry I have to weigh up and calculate I've got to assess the effect of that movement and that decision upon every single member of my family.

I've got to ask would it help them would it destroy them. They are an essential part of the calculation.

and I'm saying that on a cosmic and on an eternal scale God has done the same. I believe that as God disposed this 20th century as God planned the present distribution of world forces that God looked at the impact on every one of his own children children.

He is the minister of God to thee. Now I know that it is mind-boggling in its intricacy but to this God the hairs of our heads are numbered.

[17 : 42] The name of each one of us is engraven on the palm of God's hand. And so the political system in Britain nation in the whole western world the whole complex of forces represented in the United Nations is all part of God's calculation.

He is God's minister for thee. And then he answered he is God's minister or servant to thee for good.

Now I think you'll find that most Christians regard politics as evil and they would say perhaps they are a necessary evil. But then again it's a viewpoint that Paul does not share.

He is God's minister to thee for good. He is there for your sake and he is there for your good. It is not an evil thing not even a necessary evil.

It is one of God's great positive contributions to your good. Now the key to understanding that is to recall the teaching of 1st Timothy chapter 2 where Paul is telling us to pray for those in authority and where he tells us to pray specifically for four things that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honor.

[19 : 22] That is the good that God has in mind that through the political framework there would prevail quiet and peace and godliness and honor.

God has ordained government for those four great ends. That is to maintain internal security to maintain international security honor so that human beings can live with dignity can maximize their own creative and cultural potential can express their own personalities can enjoy their own freedom can illustrate and embody the fact that they are made in the image of god and we have every right

before god to look at the system and ask is this honorable is the way the system forces people to live is it honorable is the deprivation of housing honorable is the curtailment of facilities in education is that honorable is unemployment is it honorable now of course there may be factors beyond government control it may be that one has no right to charge government with the guilt of those situations but I am saying that we are the right to ask is life honorable is life honorable in Glasgow East End is life honorable in Soweto as it is in Johannesburg because that is the good is there quiet is there peace is there honor but also is there godliness it is the vocation and responsibility of government so to use its power that godliness is not hindered it is bound before god to do all it can within the limits of toleration and liberty of conscience to make it possible for the christian church to fulfill its own mandate in the proclamation of the gospel people Paul will not allow that government is evil won't allow that politics is evil won't concede that it's only at best unnecessary evil he says it's good without it there would be no quiet no peace no honor and no godliness and then there is a third thing government

Paul says is an avenger of wrath it's set up by god it's set up by god for good and it is an avenger of wrath or an agent of wrath now the bible here is being totally realistic it acknowledges the presence of the human society of those who are evil doers whose deliberate intention it is to live in the violation of the law in the exploitation of the weak and it is the role of government Paul says to restrain them it is even the role of government Paul says to terrorize them to strike terror into the heart of the criminal in verse 3 terrors rulers are not a terror to good works but to the evil they have a divine mandate to strike terror into the heart of the man who breaks the law and it is at that point that

Paul brings in the concept of the sword he beareth not the sword in vain now the sword is a symbol of violence and it is a fact that the only answer to certain manifestations of human depravity is violence and the state is given the right to use force because in biblical realism there is no other answer to a great deal of human behavior but to counter it with force the sword at one level is capital punishment at another level it is the forcible imprisonment of those who violate law at another level it's a power to apprehend vested in a police force but whatever form it is the principle that it is legitimate to use violence or to use force to use force to terrorize the workers of iniquity that is laid out firmly by

[25 : 06] Paul in this passage now it is worth noting that there is no word spoken here of reforming the perspective is not one at which we are concerned to heal the criminal or to restore him I'm not saying that that is an invalid perspective but I'm saying this that when it comes to retribution the concern of the Bible is with righteousness and with justice it is wrong to punish in order to deter others it's wrong to make an example of a human being it is wrong to imprison him even to reform him he is imprisoned because it is right it's a matter of justice and the state is given the authority to use force in order to restrain and to intimidate and terrorize now that power that force must be used humanely it must be used righteously within many

God-given safeguards but the right to use it and the need to use it is part of the Bible's doctrine of the state and I'm going to add one thing more to this analysis of what the state is and what government is for taken from outside this passage and that is this that government is subject to the law in other words I'm saying it is bound by the ten commandments and it is bound by the whole Christian ethic now I think there is a great deal of confusion in this area because we draw a radical distinction between the obligations of the collective and the obligations of the individual and we tend to imagine I think that obligations of a moral kind only bind individuals and don't bind collectives at all and what

I'm saying is that the ethic the imperatives the principles that bind the individual human being these also bind the collective of human beings the Decalogue the ten commandments the fourth commandment whatever commandment it is that commandment binds trade union it binds district councils it binds government it binds international bodies the ethic of love the sanctity of life the sanctity of truth the sanctity of property of marriage of a man's reputation all of these bind the cabinet bind the government exactly as they bind individual human beings we have no right to say as is often said that in foreign policy or in diplomacy there are no principles only interests because that is to say that the foreign office is not under law to God it is most emphatically under law to God and if it lies it's answerable to God if it exploits it's answerable to God if it oppresses it's answerable to God if it destroys a man's reputation it's answerable to God there is an ethic that must guide all of the government's relations and operations whether it's publicity or negotiation or election pledges

they are bound by all the great sanctities and the fact of it being a collective being a body of men does not press them in the least above the law and I would say even further that just as the individual is bound by the claims of

Christ so is the collective so is the council so is the cabinet bound by the claims of Christ bound to do all in its power all within its mandate within its remit to further the cause of the Christian gospel now there is a great objection to that doctrine and it's the objection that one is being purely unrealistic and I am being unrealistic but principles are not about pragmatism or practicalities they're ideals and the ideal is that government is bound to the gospel it is bound to further that gospel and it's my experience furthermore that in negotiations with public bodies it is always wise to tell them the ideal tell them the very best possible and let them work out the practical you state the ideal let them say what is practical

I said four things I said government is ordained by God I said government is for good I said government is the agent of God's wrath I said government is bound by the law of God I'm going to ask now and briefly a different question and that's this what then is our obligation to government what are our own duties now here again the apostle is quite minute and specific we are he says first of all to submit let every soul be subject to the higher powers now in many ways the meaning of that is obvious we are to obey government subject in that great sense that means that we obey the enactments of government and parliament we obey the laws we obey the law when we like the law and we obey the law when we don't like the law even when we think it is bad law then for the sake of God for the sake of conscience we are subject we may of course endeavour within our constitution to have that law amended but so long as the law is law

[32 : 58] Christians will distinguish themselves by keeping the law even when there is a proof of the actual law in question now I be set with all kinds of qualifications I state them as I go along there are exceptions there are situations when government commands what God forbids and then I must choose between Christ and Caesar and then I've got to choose Christ if government does enact that I must do something which God forbids me to do then I shall not do it that's the way Christians in Nazi Germany had to react to many of Hitler's directives because those directives of an existing government were violations of the will of

God and they had therefore to disobey them and sometimes also of course government forbids what God commands government might forbid me to preach the gospel it did that of course in the New Testament church in the book of Acts they forbade Peter and John to preach it happened also in Covenant in Scotland the church couldn't meet couldn't preach the Covenanters couldn't accept that kind of restriction it happens today in the Soviet Union that the Christian church can meet for worship but it cannot evangelize there must be no religious propaganda now there there is direct challenge to the authority of God we cannot obey laws which enact what God forbids or obey laws which forbid what God commands but otherwise we are bound by the law of the state even who ourselves disapprove of that law if I take one simple illustration there are many

Christians and I'm not among them who maintain that the recent seat belt law is a violation of individual freedom law now I don't support that view because I think that we have to be protected ourselves from sometimes our own folly and protected from the terrible possibility of being half dead but I can respect that point of view that it is a violation of my freedom but even even if I hold that even if I resent that law deeply I am bound as a Christian to respect it because it does not command anything that God forbids and it doesn't forbid anything that God commands now I'm sure that I'm not making this objection all that clear I'm going to the risk of complicate it one stage further by reminding you of this it is the same word as we have in Ephesians 5 where the apostle Paul tells you to submit to one another be filled with the spirit singing with melody in your hearts and so on and submitting yourselves one to another the fear of God in other words it isn't so much about obedience simply it's about submission but it's mutual it's almost submit your own interest to those of government and I'm saying it for this reason that it is really reciprocal for example

Paul wants the wife to submit to her husband but that doesn't mean that she becomes his tool or loses her own personality because there is a corresponding obligation on the husband to submit his interests to those of his wife and there is always in this submission in this world this idea of reciprocity it is mutual the citizen is bound to submit to the enactments of the state but the state is also bound before God to consult the needs of its individual citizens and to aim always at their interests so first of all where to submit to government the second point is this where to participate in the political process now of course that was no part of Paul's original teaching because

Paul did not live in a democracy but we live in a democracy and in fact we owe that democracy in its British form we owe it almost entirely to the labors of the Christian fathers of the Cromwellian and Covenanting period it was through these men's thinking through their publicity through their controversies through their sufferings that we merged into our present democratic heritage now in democracy what happens of course is that power is devolved on the people that we as the citizens we have the power the power of the ballot box now it is true that once government is elected we are powerless for five years but once the term is over they must go to the people and we have to participate intelligently in that whole process we have to use the vote intelligently we have to inform ourselves as to the issues at state now it may be for example that in the next election there may be a choice between common market and non-common market between nuclear weapons and no between an economic policy emphasizing the control of inflation and one emphasizing the reduction of unemployment

[40 : 07] I have no answers but I'm saying you must know the questions because before God you're going to have to express your mind because you live in a participatory political system and it's no you're saying it's evil and that shall not be a part of it because we have been born into it we have the power you can decide not to use it but you must decide so responsibly we have to vote we have to inform ourselves we have to criticize government criticize may be in a strict maybe in a strict etymological sense of judging it expressing our own Christian judgment of its actions of its strategy of its methods of its publicity if politicians are dishonest communicators the Christian church should say so if politicians create vast urban deserts then we should say so if politicians are dishonest in their foreign policy then the

Christian church should say so you go back into the old testament where there is chapter after chapter of political comment because the church saw itself as having this prophetic role where it had to speak God's word there are plenty who speak the word of expediency the church must speak the word of truth the church must concern itself not with economic consequences or the power consequences but with the human and the personal and the spiritual consequences of the policy of our government and of all the governments of the world so first of all we submit to government secondly we participate in the government because that is the way God has placed us that's the system that God has given to us and thirdly we are to pray for government submit participate pray pray says the apostle again to

Timothy for kings and for all in authority pray that we may lead may be able to lead quiet and peaceable lives let me expand it for a moment pray that God would raise up true leadership I believe that political gifts are divine charismata maybe not of the same order as the spirit's charismata within the Christian church but they come from the same the same source and I am not I hope being cynical and not superior in suggesting that the nation and our whole civilization is suffering from an appalling dearth of political talent

I mean political in the best sense I also believe that the Christian church is suffering from a dearth of spiritual leadership and spiritual talent and as I respond to the church's need by praying to God for laborers to go into the harvest so as I contemplate the monumental issues on which politicians deliberate and when I reflect upon their character upon their intelligence upon their backgrounds and when I tremble then surely I have the right to go to God and to pray Lord don't give us children to lead us don't give us a mature man don't give us unprincipled men don't give us liars don't give us men to talk humbug or talk nothing but give us true leadership pray for political charisma not charisma not charisma the popular sense of charm and plausibility but real strength and real courage and real vision do I have to accept that the problems of

Ulster are endemic are insoluble are to last as long as western civilization last to the end of time I'm not prepared to accept that I'm going to God to ask for someone who will see his way through see the issues who will say the unthinkable who will analyze dissect who will persuade who will cajole who will unite factions I'm talking again in a most unrealistic way but I'm talking about God's power and I'm asking God for men of that caliber men who will guide us through the morals men who will lead us through our present economic not recession but revolution bring us into that age of high technology and low employment we need leadership of the very highest caliber to bring us through that particular crisis pray now

[46 : 46] I come back to this those politicians those governments they're for good we want men who will be a terror to the workers of evil national and international we want men able to go into the bog side into the false road into Glasgow East End and there bring peace and quiet and honour and

godliness men who will cause our urban deserts to blossom as the rose that's what we want and the only place it can come from is God you can't produce them by putting them simply through the public schools or the trade unions or the building chambers every good and every perfect gift is from God so we pray for men and women of that caliber and we pray too that God would uphold them under the burdens of their office because the burden is monumental there is hardly time to sleep there is no time to relax for the five years of a premiership a man or a woman is an ever taught an ever taught bow it can't for one moment relax the physical strain the mental strain the nervous strain the emotional strain is enormous and I don't think that we are half mindful of it and we ourselves maybe contribute to it by our own unkind words our own unkind actions and so we have to ask God to maintain to help to support these people under the burdens that they have to carry bearing in mind especially that on the mental health of the

American president or the Soviet president there depends not only our well-being but almost our very being itself it becomes surely of enormous importance that God should sustain and guide them in critical decision making and at last this pray that God would forgive them I'm not saying it entirely judgmentally I'm saying it because of the moralist fact that those words the apostle Paul pray for kings and for all in authority are said very much in the context of the atonement because Paul goes on to add there is one mediator the

Lord Jesus Christ God will have all men to be saved there is one mediator in other words he's reminding us that these politicians they need the same mediator and they need the same salvation as we ourselves they are not as the apostle men and women beyond the need of redemption or beyond the possibility of redemption but they are men and women who need the only savior there is and the only mediator that there is and I wonder whether in fact we do make conscience of this or bring your national sins to the blood of Christ and of asking God to bring his own forgiveness and the sense of forgiveness and the healing of forgiveness into the hearts of burdened politicians so I'm saying we submit to them and I'm saying that we are to honor them I'm saying we're to pray for them I'm saying that we have to remember that the burdens the mistakes they make must often weigh heavily upon their own consciences sins and they must be led by the Christian gospel to that place where they can find forgiveness not only for their own personal sins but equally for their own official and political sins sins now I'm very conscious that for the most part we feel totally impotent in our own political system that we must have confidence in the power of little in the power of our own participation and the bawd and power of our own prayers in my own limited experience

I have learned that it is not as futile as we think to involve ourselves in those processes and I am convinced that the reason of the Christian voice is not more effective politically it's not that men despise it or dismiss it but it's in fact either that we are inept at expressing it or we don't express it at all I believe and I know that people want to hear the church's voice if only the church will go to the trouble of expressing it succinctly and expressing it effectively let us pray we ask oh lord thy blessing upon thy word it comes at us from many different points of view it affects every area of our lives we pray thee oh lord to have pity upon us upon our civilization upon our nation upon those in government give us oh lord true leadership give thy known strength and courage to those called to leadership and grant that we may experience what thy word promises that these things shall be for good to us that we may know quiet and peace and honour and godliness for thy glory's sake amen