

Proper 18 (A)
Pastor Ed Harkey

Romans 13:1-10
TLC, Keene, NH

Fulfilling the Law of Love ... As Citizens

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Introduction

“Did you know you can pass by a policeman sitting alongside the road and not be afraid of getting a ticket? The radar gun can be out, trained right at your car, tracking you as you drive through his speed trap. Sure, your heart might speed up a bit when you see him. You might even ease upon the gas pedal. But there is a way that you can sail right by without having to worry. What is it? Go the speed limit!” Obey ... the law. [Nielsen, *CJ*, July 2002, 307]

It's what we are called as citizens to do ... even if the laws at times *seem* unfair or unjustified. Even if there is fraud and waste in the departments of those who make them. Not, of course, if they command those citizens to do something contrary to God's will. But otherwise obeying the Law is what we are called to do as citizens of a country ... as citizens of this country.

What is our motivation for doing so? Love. Pure and simple. Not only love for God – who gives us such authorities to govern and to keep us safe ... to hold evil at bay. But also love, honor and respect for those who govern us – regardless of their political ideology. It is not an easy task.

Main Point: However, let us – as citizens of a far better country – see authority as a gift from God in this one, necessary, for our good, whereby God ultimately brings such authority to bear in order to save the world. [Adapted from Krueger, *CPR*, 21:3, 30]

GOD IS CLEARLY NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PROBLEMS, BUT
HE HAS GIVEN AND ESTABLISHED THE HOLY REMEDY ...
THE LAW OF LOVE.

Amen.

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OK. So is it just me, or is this Sunday's reading from Romans, made for a time such as this? Wherein, granted, Paul's words may not be something we *want* to hear, but it does seem more than coincidental that this reading would come up, esp. given the political climate in which we find ourselves. Where, be it 1st century Rome, or 21st century America, these words do provoke a response in us – albeit, perhaps a nervous one.

Which pick us up right where we left off last week. “*Let love be genuine.*” Where, by our words and our way of living, we set the example. To use the prophet Ezekiel' imagery, “Christians are ... God's watchmen; [we] are witnesses and living examples of his love” ... in all aspects of our lives. [*Sermon Studies on the Epistles (SSoE)*, A, 306] Also towards the governing authorities.

Romans 13:1 **Let every person** [each disciple of Jesus, willingly not forcefully¹] **be subject to the governing authorities** [“from the greatest to the least, from the local crossing guard (you go, Wanda) to the president in his oval office”²]. **For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted [assigned] by God.** ² **Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.**

“*From God ... by God ... what God has appointed.*” Three times God's Word establishes that the rulers of this world rule only as God allows them rule. It's an arresting thought, as sure as it was in Paul's day ... where, keep in mind, it was the very rule under which Paul was as a citizen that would one day take his life.

No friend in government there!

¹ As opposed to υπακουω or πειθαρχεω which are rendered more forcefully as “obey.” “Properly understood, Paul's words call for respect but not blind obedience.” [Holst, *CPR*,, 6:4, 16]

² *Sermon Studies on the Epistles (SSoE)*, A, 307

So let there be no room for any misunderstanding here. “God establishes the existing powers. Christians are to obey and respect the existing powers.” [SSoE, 307]

Why?

³ 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, ⁴ 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 essence, the main role of government is to keep its citizens safe – *all* of its citizens [from womb to tomb], especially the most vulnerable among us. Wherein, at times, in seeking to do that, it is called also to punish the wrong ... to keep evil in check.

Wherein, the peace and protection typically afforded citizens of this world is not only there for the masses. “The left-hand kingdom [that is government] serves his right-hand kingdom [the Body of Christ – His Church].” [Holst, CPR, 6:4, 16]

Note, they are only “servants” like we are only servants ... first and foremost to Christ, receiving power from God as well as owing our allegiance to Him. Wherein, “as soon as our rulers begin to make laws and demands that are clearly contrary to God’s will, they are no longer servants but usurpers.” [SSoE, 308] Apostates. Despots.

“Properly understood, Paul’s words call for respect but not blind obedience.” [Holst, CPR, 6:4, 16]

Yet, even our civil “disobedience ... will not result in open rebellion and overt acts of violence ... but rather in patient refusal to act contrary to Christian conscience, even suffering persecution if necessary, trusting that this patient endurance will ‘put to silence the ignorant talk of foolish men’ (1 Peter 2:11-25).” [SSoE, 308]

⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

Baptized and redeemed of Jesus, saved by Love – by what was the greatest act of love shown on His creation in the Cross – we are motivated by love. Wherein, “when we submit ourselves to those in authority, we are not bowing to men but kneeling before our Savior God. We are recognizing his protecting love and thanking him for his unfailing mercy.” [SSoE, 308]

It's why Christians – as a whole – *are **the** most* law abiding people. Not because we are subject to those who rule us, but because we love God, as sure as He loves us. Where, as the embodiment of that love, we become symbols of love, honor, and respect towards those who serve and live among us.

To press the point a bit further, Paul says, it's why we pay taxes.

⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, **for the authorities are** [what?] **ministers** [worship-workers] **of God, attending to this very thing.** ⁷ **Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.**

Here's a thought. Imagine what *might* have transpired, had Joseph thumbed his nose at Caesar, and *not* taken Mary to Bethlehem, in order enroll and pay taxes owed to a Roman ruler? God probably would have found another way, but it was taxes that took Joseph to Bethlehem ... according to eternal plan of God set forth in His Word. To show that, “God will [even] use the governing authorities to carry out His will.” [Nielsen, 308]

Where, how often in the early history of the church was this borne out? Where it was the governing authorities that brought Roman justice to bear in Jesus' death for the sins of the world. Recall that small conversation Jesus had with Pilate, who in a moment of frustration said to Jesus, “Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

Jesus to Pilate: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” [John 19:10-11] As a result of that Roman justice a Roman centurion – as well as a thief – came to faith that dreadful day.

It was also the governing authorities to whom Paul appealed that – at least for a time – spared the Apostle’s life. How many came to faith as a result of that Roman justice? Or ... it was the government of the day – the *pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) – that allowed the Gospel of Jesus to be so easily widespread, bringing the Gospel to practically the whole known world ... of which we are the blessed inheritors!

All to say, that while the governing authorities don’t always do their God-ordained job [for which they will one day give an account], the call goes out for us still to ours ... even as they – most often unknowingly – still carry out God’s will. [Nielsen, 308]

Which brings us to what we, as citizens of this country, are called to be and to do ... as the baptized and redeemed of Jesus.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other [loving self-sacrificially ... actively seeking the other’s good regardless of the other’s worthiness or merit³], **for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law** [i.e. “fully satisfied its true and deepest intention”⁴].

⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, **are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; **therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.**

Here is a blessed truth: when a baptized and redeemed child of God – like you – is led by the Spirit, and is motivated by the Spirit’s love, then this world is a better place, regardless of what others may command us to do.

When a baptized and redeemed child of God – like you – is led by the Spirit and is motivated by the Spirit’s love, “then his neighbor’s marriage, his neighbor’s life, his neighbor’s goods are as precious in his eyes as his own.” [Franzmann, *Romans*]

³ Indicated by the present infinitive

⁴ Raabe, *CJ*, July 1993, 258

“This kind of [Christ-like] love, seeks no ill and works no evil against *any* fellow citizen. This kind of love results ... in the fulfillment of God’s holy will for all people of all time.”

Wherein, as light, salt ... a city on a hill, we simply “let this world see a reflection of Christ’s perfect love in our Christian love. Wherein, *“as [surely as] I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”* (Ezekiel 33:11).” [SSoE, 310] It is to this task that we are ultimately called – no matter what quarter we may be serving. Knowing that all the while that we are conducting our labor, voting our conscience, praying for our leaders, and maybe even serving in government, we serve others – to be sure – but we are more, serving God.

“How far short we fall from fulfilling God’s law of love! But how wonderfully this kind of love was fulfilled on the cross! ... [Where, this day] He who fulfilled this law of love reissues his law of love: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” [SSoE, 310]

Conclusion

It’s 2nd down with the ball resting on their own 1-yard line. The coach wants to get the ball away from the goal line so he can then punt it down field. So he instructs his young, inexperienced quarterback during the time-out, “Hand off to Jones, our big fullback, on the next two plays, and then punt.”

The quarterback was eager to follow instruction. So on the first play, he hands off to Jones, who found a hole off tackle and ran 50 yards! On the next play, to the coach’s surprise, the same hole opened up, and Jones ran 45 yards! The coach is beside himself, as are all the fans in the stands. Sensing a touchdown, they are on their feet, screaming at the top of their lungs.

But imagine their surprise when the quarterback takes the snap, drops back and – five yards from a touchdown – punts the ball. Where, as the team is coming off the field, the coach is heard yelling, “What in the world were you thinking about when you called that last play?”

To which the young man bluntly replied, “I was thinking what a dumb coach we have.” [Tim Carter, *That’s a Good Question*, 107-108]

Closing Appeal:

“As Christians we obey, not because governments may demand obedience, but because we have experienced the freedom that loving forgiveness brings. We obey because Jesus has freed us from blind slavery to selfishness and opened our hearts to loving others as he has loved us. We obey because Jesus has freed us to see God’s good purpose in government, because Jesus has freed us to appreciate that good government is godly. Under the power of this love we not only obey, but also we actively seek to help government be the good government God created it to be.”

[Stuehrenberg, *CPR*, 12:4, 12]

OR ...

“God’s people do more than observe the letter of the law. The Gospel grants an attitude of love for others that permeates all aspects of life. Love for others results in continuing action.”

[Holst, *CPR*, 6:4, 17]

Therefore, let us – as citizens of a greater country, see authority in this one as a gift from God, necessary, for our good, whereby, God ultimately brings such authority to bear in order to save the world.

GOD IS CLEARLY NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PROBLEMS, BUT
HE HAS GIVEN AND ESTABLISHED THE HOLY REMEDY ...

He has given love. Indeed, He has given this world ... you!

Amen.

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