

Sermon Given by

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Romans 13 - "Votewise!"

My wife Susu went though her early teens with a terminally ill mother who because she was so unwell regularly had to farm her out to friends' families to look after her. Susu had memories of one family who had done a good job parenting, as far as she could recall.

Recently she wrote to ask what their tips for parenting were. I was struck by the very first thing her friend Eleanor wrote in reply: Quote: 'Something I learned at sailing camp applies. We were taught O.W.A – "obedience with alacrity". That meant you immediately do what the skipper tells you even if you disagree with it. You can take it up for discussion later, of course; but the first response is to obey'.

Eleanor commented that that was never stated as a rule in her family home, but something very like it was practised. If you were told to do something, then it was wise to do it at that moment. You could put forth your position later if you felt what had been asked was wrong in some way, and you would be heard - but there was nonetheless a hierarchy in the house.

I'm not sure that that principle 'Obedience with alacrity' finds its way into many parenting books today. In a culture which stresses equality and thinks that hierarchy is by definition is contrary to equality, obedience with alacrity isn't very fashionable. But it is not a million miles away in tone from Romans 13 verse 1: ***Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.***

In Romans 13, obviously, it is not relationships within the family which are under discussion, but our relationship to the state and its leaders. And in our short series in the run up to a General Election, this is one of the most relevant passages in the Bible for us to focus on.

It isn't going to tell us which party to vote for. Let me straight away relieve you if you are worried that the pulpit might be used for a party political broadcast! But it will hopefully help us, as our title puts it, to Votewise – to have a godly perspective on politics and on our place in society as citizens.

I want to take three themes from the passage. Let's notice first **the origin of the governing authorities**. Where do they derive their power from – who established them? Paul is in no doubt and he wants his readers to be in no doubt either.

He states it twice in different ways in the very first verse of the chapter. ***¹Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.***

And if that wasn't clear enough it is re-emphasised as he continues- in verse 2 to start with. ***²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.***

Then there are three mentions of the fact that the ruler is God's servant: twice in verse 4 ***he is God's servant to do you good*** or ***He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*** and one last time in verse 6 ***the authorities are God's servants***.

It is the assumption in the Bible that God is the Supreme Ruler over all Creation – in fact he is ultimately the ONLY king of all Creation. So any other power or authority cannot therefore be an alternative power – they must have delegated power. There are no rivals to God for the rule of the universe: if other powers exist, they have their power delegated to them by God; they are his servants.

This goes beyond the general truth that government is part of God's overall provision for the wellbeing of the world. This is saying that every actual government that exists is in power by God's decree...

There are no exceptions. You can tell that by the way he puts it both negatively and positively in verse 1. Negatively, ***'there is no authority except that which God has established'***; positively, ***'the authorities that exist*** (in other words, all of them) ***are instituted by God'***.

It does not matter whether a government exists because a king has appointed his son to rule, or because a tribal chief has defeated his rivals, or as happens in our country because a people have voted someone into office—all authority is there because God put it there. "There is no authority except from God."

And we know that includes bad authority because Pilate, the man who ordered Jesus crucified, was a bad authority, and Jesus said to his face in John 19, ***"You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above."***

So it doesn't matter what human means brought the authority to power, and it doesn't matter whether the power itself is just or unjust—this text says that God is behind all authority. That includes the authorities beneath the head of state – ministers, judges, tribunals, police, local councils, local building inspector. They are all there because of God's providential decree.

So the origin of the governing authorities is God himself. How important for us to hold onto that, particularly in a constitutional democracy. The assumption in England is that the voters are the ones who have put rulers in power.

That may be the means by which they were chosen but standing behind that is God himself. And woe betide the government who views the electorate as more important than God. Rulers are not primarily answerable to the voter or to the opinion polls. They answer to the supreme Ruler.

On to our next heading therefore...

2. The obligations of the governing authorities...

What are the authorities accountable to God to do?

Well, God has given rulers delegated power to do his will in certain areas. Not, interestingly, in the church. You never read of the apostles ordering the secular authorities in the New

Testament to tackle the heresies in Galatia or Corinth. That is the responsibility of church leaders, not state authorities.

Nor are the secular authorities charged with raising families. **Parents** are the God-appointed authorities for that.

God has given rulers certain **limited** tasks. Let me read verse 3-4 and you will easily see what their powers are given them for: ***³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. ⁴For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.***

The obligations of the governing authorities are to commend and encourage those who do what is right, and to punish those who do wrong.

There is a debate about whether the mention of the sword can justify the ultimate sanction of the death penalty in some cases; Christians disagree on that matter. But there is no debate at all that the Bible's view of rulers is that they are to commend and encourage those who do what is right, and to punish those who do wrong.

Romans 13 implies that there is such a thing as a universal moral law, which we can expect to see expressed in government, even non-Christian government; it is the function of government to protect the good and punish the bad.

That happens as a result of what theologians have called common grace. This is simply a technical term for the idea that God is gracious not just to believers, but to all human beings. 'He makes the sun rise and the rain fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous'.

Yes, he loves his people with special grace, but he loves the whole world with common grace. In normal circumstances a government which commends what is good and punishes what is bad is one instance of that.

Simply because human beings are made in the image of God, even though God isn't always acknowledged as the source of morality, there is an acknowledgement of right and wrong which will find its way into expression in a government's laws. And there would be a tidal wave of evil if God had not ordained human governments to act as a restraining influence on human evil and an encouragement towards the good.

Obviously, with an election in the offing, this should shape what we want to see from our government. That manifesto slogan of a former US president 'It's the economy, stupid' was not adequate; nor was the war-cry of thirteen years ago in this country: Education, education, education.

Those election slogans are not wholly wrong, but they are not adequate. The economy and education are undoubtedly moral issues. But they are not the only moral issues.

If I simply vote for what leaves me with less tax to pay or better, cheaper education for my children, then I am not holding the government accountable to do what Romans 13 says is their job.

If the job of government is to uphold right and wrong then in a democracy Christians have a significant part to play. They have a vote to use wisely and well to put in power rulers who will fulfil the obligations here.

The further a society gets from acknowledging God, the less likely it is that it will elect a government which is really equipped to commend what is good and punish evil. Governments do not always get it right. So Christians who read their Bible and have a better than average moral compass should think hard how to influence non-Christians society for the public good – and how to use their vote, if possible, to that end.

Which is far from simple! Think of the whole matter of marriage and the secular push towards redefining marriage to include relationships between two men or two women.

According to the Bible, marriage between a man and a woman is so fundamental to the health of human society that Christians should work graciously and wisely for its legal protection, with every means of persuasion possible.

If someone says that we Christians are trying to legislate our morality, we must no doubt concede that laws protecting marriage are about morality.

But they belong in the same category as laws protecting life and property and contracts. No one reasonable complains against the prohibition of murder and stealing and perjury. So no one should complain about the protection of marriage.

Marriage between a man and a woman is a moral and natural reality so profoundly woven into fabric of human life and society that to undo it will do huge damage to families, communities and to society as a whole.

Of course marriage is not the only issue. It is a great shame – and it greatly weakens the effect of Christian lobbying – if Christians only appear to voice concerns on one area.

All sorts of other matters could be mentioned where a simple commitment to love our neighbour will push us to do all that we can to put some people in office and to remove others.

I've mentioned already education and the economy. Have you given any thought to the following issues: asylum and immigration; race; international order; transport; criminal justice; the environment. Health and medical ethics – which includes embryo research, cloning, abortion and euthanasia.

Please don't mishear me to say that we all have to be experts in all these areas. But given that we have some responsibility for who is in power, then we have some responsibility to ensure that policies in these and other areas are commending what is good and restraining what is wrong.

We don't have to know everything - but there are people who have done their homework on how the different candidates have voted and what their policies are. We should at least be willing to find out more.

The puzzle we find ourselves left with in a democratic system is that we are in part responsible for who we put in power – *and then, once they are elected we find ourselves under their power*. So let's move on to our last heading.

3. Obligations towards the governing authorities...

The chapter starts in verse 1 ***Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities***.

But once he has spelled out the origin of the governing authorities' power and the obligations of governing authorities, Paul outlines in greater detail what he means by that submission, particularly in verses 5-7

⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. ⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Paul wants it to be clear that the gospel isn't in any way antagonistic to a properly functioning Roman government. Christians are to submit to the government authorities out of reverence to God. Obedience with alacrity...

We immediately think of Hitler and Pol Pot – and we ask, 'Surely we are not to submit to that sort of tyranny?'

We call to mind the courageous struggles for liberation which we have occasionally seen – for example the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa.

But the point is that these are extreme situations – and we shouldn't be blinded to the situations in which **most** people live **most** of the time... If we rebel against lawful authority, we rebel against God...

Where a democratically elected government has ceased to suppress evil and promote what is good, the electorate have a democratic right to try to remedy that evil. More obviously when a government is commanding what God forbids or forbidding what God commands, there is a plain duty to disobey.

There is no unqualified command in the Bible to honour the secular state. Under apartheid, one of the evangelical church leaders in South Africa went to see the then president PW Botha to press for changes. As soon as he went into the president's office, Botha sat him down and read to him from Romans 13 – submit to the governing authorities. That was the beginning and end of the interview, as if that was all there was to say.

The Bible does say more. There are instances when Daniel in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New rightly disobeyed the ruling authorities.

But Romans 13 is talking about the normal exercise of government, even imperfect government. And the call is to submit freely to what the authorities say, out of a deeper commitment to the God who institutes earthly governments.

This is in harmony with what Jesus himself said: 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's'. God is over all, and when you settle your commitment to him, it will have an outworking in your obedience to Caesar.

The issue under discussion in Jesus' case, you remember, was the whole matter of paying tax. He settled it by asking his questioners if they had a Roman coin and when they admit they do, then clearly they **do** owe some allegiance to Caesar. It's his economy they're part of, his government and treasury they benefit from. 'Very well', says Jesus. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's'. Why should you have the perks of Roman Government, a peace and security other parts of the Ancient world dreamed of, with none of the obligation to pay for it?...

And surely Jesus would say the same to us... Some of us have had long stays in hospital. I can tell you, when I came out of a month in hospital, without it costing me anything directly, I acknowledged that the Income Tax I paid towards the NHS was fair enough.

Perhaps the bite of it is felt simply in the whole matter of **obedience**. With legislation encroaching on more and more areas where we used to hope that enlightened common sense would guide us, it is easy to feel that the state is treating us like children and to begrudge obedience. So we look for loopholes or we comply, but with a moan.

Let me give an example of some changes to the law which affect us as churches quite significantly – in regard to the Criminal Records procedure for one. From July onwards it will be necessary, we think, on good advice, for all people who do children's activities in the summer to be checked by the Criminal Record bureau. So our administrator will be contacting people who don't have CRB approval so we can get a team of qualified people together – to give our regular children's work team a breather over the summer. I hope if you hear from her you will make her work easy for her.

Similarly when it comes to food hygiene. The PCC voted last year – again, on good advice – to register the North Building kitchen. One consequence is that we are no longer allowed to cook meals for church events back at home and bring them in to the North Building to reheat them. That is the law – and we need to comply with it, and in the right spirit as well. Did you notice how the attitudes of **respect** and **honour** are mentioned by Paul? I'm not sure that I have been doing that when in the past I have moaned about the 'nanny state'

Now it's true that we might question whether government is wise or right to legislate in this way. And of course as citizens we have every right to try to change the laws by our vote or by any other legal means.

But let's not pretend that this sort of law is a massive threat to our civil liberties. These new laws are not a justification for civil disobedience.

Even if we were convinced of our government being evil and unjust, the danger to our soul from unjust governments is nowhere near as great as the danger to our soul from the sort of pride that kicks against submission.

No government mistreatment or unjust law has ever sent anyone to hell. But pride and rebellion is what sends everyone to hell who doesn't have a Saviour.

That is the issue here. If as a child I refuse to offer obedience with alacrity to my parents; or as a citizen I refuse to offer obedience with alacrity to my ruler. Then I am never going to submit freely and willingly to God, when what he wants goes against what I want.

And I forfeit a Saviour who himself submitted to the governing authorities – at the cost of his life, on the cross. He wouldn't be a Saviour had he not done so – because that unjust death was where he paid for all our sins, including our pride.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)