

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **In God, We Trust**

(Romans 13:1-7)

#### **Introduction:** Dual citizenship...

For the last two and a half months, you and I have been challenged by and encouraged by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I have referred to it as "The Kingdom Constitution" because in it (Matthew, chapters 5-7) Jesus lays out what a life looks like under His Lordship. He is the king and we are His subjects.

The Apostle Paul took this imagery of Jesus' kingdom and ran with it, describing us, who have believed in Him, as "citizens" of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

That's you. That's me. We are citizens of God's invisible country *and* - what is under consideration today - we are citizens of the United States of America.

Every Christian is a dual citizen.

We are to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. But we live here now. Without question, our primary allegiance is to Jesus' kingdom. But, we pledge allegiance to the flag.

Our heart's affections and our first commitment is to our Savior. We're laying up treasure for an abundant entrance into a future kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 3:20.

But, for all kinds of reasons, we care about what happens here. We care about living conditions, the economy, national security - even politics. Which brings us to Campaign 2016.

#### *Campaign 2016...*

The past year - and more - has been, politically speaking, a remarkable season for our nation.

At the local level, I've been pretty pleased by the civility of political discourse. That may only be because of the lack of civility at the state and national level.

If you just close your eyes to think of "Campaign 2016" - you may want to open them. Fast. This campaign season has been tediously long and unusually nasty. Candidates and their surrogates and Super PACs have thrown much mud. Sadly, much of it has stuck.

Of course, there has been some discussion and fuss about policy. But much more, we have endured endless accusations about lack of integrity and dishonesty and moral failure. We've seen enough ugly campaign ads to last us through 2020. And then, the debates. Well.

But it's all soon to be over and done with. Many - myself, included - have already voted. The campaign will last less than sixty more hours. And then, we will move ahead, as a nation, living with the elections' results.

Of course, you are I are aware of all of this.

We don't live in an isolated bubble and we know what's going on around us. We get updates from newsfeeds. We read our favorite bloggers. We watch social / unsociable media. We talk with friends. We try to stay informed and we think about the issues.

And here we sit in church on a Sunday morning, eager to walk with God. We citizens of His kingdom want to think His thoughts about our other citizenship.

So, this morning, I'm bringing a message on politics.

### *Politics in the pulpit...*

Don't be alarmed.

I have always believed that what we need most on a Sunday morning when we come together is the *timeless* truth of Scripture. I still believe that and that's where we're going today. But today, I'm going to use the *timely* setting of our politics as fodder for a message from the Bible.

I'm not going to talk about candidates. I'm not going to suggest how you should vote or tell you how I voted.

What we are going to do together is what we always do. We're going to turn to the Bible and listen carefully to what God's Word says.

When thinking about how to think about any topic, my gut instinct is to turn to the Bible. That's how I'm wired and that's how our church is wired. Whether it's sexuality, marriage and family, justice issues or finances, we are people of the Book.

Today, we're asking questions of the Bible about the secular state, about government - and our relationship to it. When we want to think about how to think about politics, there are lots of places we could turn in Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Chief among these passages is the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul wrote this letter while he was on an extended stay in the city of Corinth. And Romans is a very important letter.

Bible scholars agree that Romans addresses basic Christian beliefs more thoroughly than any of Paul's other writings. Romans is the letter Paul wrote when he had time to reflect and time to lay Christian theology all out for us.

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<sup>2</sup> The early chapters of Genesis speak of the world's first kingdoms. The historical books of the Old Testament provide helpful commentary on the dangers of human government. And the prophets' denunciations of injustice by people in power speaks pointedly to 2016. Another helpful study would be to look at how Jesus, Peter, and Paul dealt with ruling authorities.

In Romans, Paul explains the Gospel, describes how the Christian life "works", tells us about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and affirms the sovereignty of God.

In the final chapters of Romans, he tells us how to lead a God-honoring life. And by the time we come to chapter 13, Paul has already spoken about our need to live as a part of a vibrant community of faith.

He then pauses, takes a deep breath, and - writing to Christians in ROME, the capitol city of the empire - speaks about how a member of that faith community is to interact with the secular state.

### **Government and Authority**

***[1] Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.***

### **Governments Are Established by God**

We'll come back to the theme of our responsibility to be subject to governing authorities shortly. First, though, hear the last phrase of that verse again: "***those which exist are established by God.***"

One of the weightiest (and most confounding) things you will hear this morning is that phrase from Romans 13:1. God has established the governments that exist.

At some level and in some sense, God was behind the founding of the United States of America. We Americans usually think that's OK.

God has also been behind, involved with, and orchestrating the establishment of any other nation you can think of. The Old Testament is filled with statements that affirm this idea.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Genesis 12:2; 17:12; Deuteronomy 28:36; 32:21; 1 Kings 11:14, 23 Psalm 75:7; Isaiah 5:26; 10:6; Jeremiah 5:15; Daniel 2:21; Amos 6:14

For instance, the prophet Daniel wrote:  
**[Daniel 2:21a] It is He who changes the times and the epochs;  
 He removes kings and establishes kings.**

Here in Romans, Paul says the same thing. God raises up nation states to fulfill His purposes in the world.

This is not to say that God is responsible for the atrocities committed by the nations He establishes.

God did not cause the horrors of Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, or Bashar al Assad's Syria. He wasn't the driving force behind American slavery or our shameful treatment of Native Americans a century and a half ago.

But it is still true that God establishes nations and those nations' rulers. All nations have a God-ordained stewardship to fulfill, and some do better at fulfilling their stewardship than others.

I believe we can say, from Daniel, that when these nations have fulfilled their stewardship - or have failed to do so - God removes them.<sup>4</sup>

Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to know this. That's because the Christians in Rome in the first century were living in a very challenging setting. They were oppressed. They were over-taxed. Their rulers were unjust.

I suspect that they wondered how they were to relate to the secular state of their day.<sup>5</sup>

They lived with and had experienced Rome's brutality. At the time Paul wrote, they were only a few years away from experiencing what would be the worst of Emperor Nero's madness.<sup>6</sup>

Paul told them, ***“those which exist are established by God.”***

You and I also want to know how to relate to the state. It's on our minds, today. And the first and foremost truth to remember is this: **God has established the authority structure that is over us.**

That's truth, but that's not the whole story. As we move backward through the first verse, we also read, ***“There is no authority except from God.”***

That's good to know two days before we discover who will be our leader and our leaders for the next several years.

### **Only God Has Authority**

God was the first power, and He will be the last. His power created all there is. He is the energizing power of everything, the Authority behind every authority.

Therefore, all human power is derived and delegated. Only God's power is inherent and intrinsic. All earthly authority and power is given by God - whether in the home, in the church, at work, or in the government.

So, if government has power - and it does - it is only because God has granted a bit of it, for a while. He is the Power behind the power of the state.

You and I want to think God's thoughts about government. We understand that He is sovereign and that He has assigned authority to governments.

As we keep reading in Romans 13 we discover a bit of the God-ordained reason and purpose for government.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 13 predicts the fall of Babylon (to Assyria) after Babylon fulfilled her role of disciplining Judah for Judah's sin.

<sup>5</sup> He was writing after having recently experienced severe mistreatment in the city of Philippi from the government. (Acts 16)

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<sup>6</sup> The apostle Peter wrote much the same thing during the later, crazed part of Nero's reign. (1 Peter 2:13-15)

<sup>7</sup> The Greek philosopher, Plato, may have been the first secular philosopher to state that the role of government was to promote justice and safety for its citizens. Not

## A Biblical Theology of Human Government (Romans 13:2-7)

### Government Glues Society Together (v. 3)

***[3] For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same;***

Two thousand years after the fact, we know that Imperial Rome had plenty of flaws. Those living in the Roman Empire knew it as well.

Not that Rome was all bad. There was the noble Roman spirit, the advanced legal system, and the military machine that was Rome.

But by the first century, there were widespread excesses and injustices. Paganism and what we would call “immorality” abounded. What we would call “morality” and true worship were suppressed.

Mad emperors and power-hungry rulers took more than they gave. In Philippi, it was the Roman government that punished Paul - state-sponsored persecution - for his bold witness for Christ.<sup>8</sup>

BUT, that government - like all governments - gave stability. That’s what governments do. They help to provide the societal glue that holds things together.

Today, we are beholden to the state for our military protection, public transportation system, utilities, police and fire departments. The government provides the infrastructure that allows society to work.

The alternative to government is anarchy - a non-system in which nobody wins because the mob rules.

And there is more. Paul says that government is charged to protect and to punish.

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that Paul was copying Plato. Paul developed his philosophy of politics from a theocentric view of the world.

<sup>8</sup> Again, see Acts 16 where he and Silas were beaten, put in stocks, and then put in jail for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus.

### Government Protects and Punishes (v. 2)

***[2] Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.***

One of the chief roles of government is to protect the innocent and to reward the obedient.

Of course, there are tragic failures to carry out this role, and we know that. We can all think of regimes in which the innocent are exploited, not protected. But the primary God-ordained purpose of government is to provide a stable and secure setting for its law-abiding citizens.

The corollary to this positive function of the state, of course, is that it also has the God-ordained right to punish those who live outside the law.

God forbids the Christian to seek his/her own vengeance (Romans 12:17-21). He allows the government to take vengeance.

At least one of the implications of Paul’s words - ***[Romans 13:4]...it does not bear the sword for nothing*** - is that the state has the authority to use coercive power to enforce laws. It can legitimately carry through with punishment.

Police forces protect from criminal activity. Jails and prisons house those who violate law.

Yes, men and women are sometimes sentenced unjustly (that is always a terrible tragedy!) and our penal system may need overhauling (in lots of ways, I believe), but government has the authority - even the mandate - to punish the guilty.

Thieves who spend time in jail, jaywalkers who pay fines, and murderers who receive the most severe penalty are receiving the judgment of God as it comes to them through the civil authorities.

Paul's point is clear here. Those in authority over us in government are to keep the peace by protecting those who obey and by holding those accountable who don't.

Paul also thought it was worth mentioning that government has the right to tax its citizens. Here, Paul is simply building on what Jesus had already said.

### **Government Can and Should Collect Taxes (vv. 6-7)**

Once, Jesus was asked by His opponents whether they should pay tax to Caesar. He instantly saw through their attempt to trip Him up and answered, **[Matthew 22:21] "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's** (i.e. - tax money); **and to God the things that are God's.** (i.e. - YOU!)"

Paul writes.

***[6] For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. [7] Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.***

Americans pay taxes today and Romans paid taxes in the first century. And Paul says nothing here about the limits of taxation. He doesn't say anything about the maximum percent allowed. He doesn't speak to the legitimacy of poll tax, sales tax, income tax, property tax, or estate tax.

He simply says that the state has the right to tax its citizens to get the money it needs to carry out its stewardship.

I suspect that you may be tempted to think the same thing I'm tempted to think. We're thinking that some of our tax monies go to some causes that we'd rather not support. It irks us to have to pay those taxes. We are tempted to be taxation's "conscientious objectors."

It has always been the case and it will continue to be the case that government sometimes spends money inefficiently, unwisely, and immorally.

But Paul offered no loopholes to the Christians living in Rome. He offers us no loopholes, either. We are to pay our taxes.

One final responsibility of government, and one that I believe rises from this passage, at least as an implication, is the duty of the state to protect its citizens from hostile outside forces.

### **Government Bears the Sword (v. 4)**

***[4]...for it does not bear the sword for nothing.***

This phrase primarily applies to the punishment of those who break the law.

But, the "**sword**" is also a picture of military might. The armed forces of Rome protected Roman cities and Roman citizens from being conquered by enemies. Today, our armed services protect us from attack and from being attacked.

This is a timely thought, just days away from our national observance of Veteran's Day, a day when we honor all veterans of our military. It is an honorable thing to serve in the defense of one's country and today we honor and thank all the men and women here and those represented here who have served.<sup>9</sup>

OK. Paul has told us that God, who is the ultimate Authority over all, has delegated authority to governments He has established to fulfill His purposes in the world.

These governments have the authority to collect taxes from their citizens as they protect them from foreign hostile forces, punish lawbreakers, protect the innocent, and hold society together.

Having seen all of this we now return to the opening phrase.

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<sup>9</sup> Formerly "Armistice Day", Veterans Day recognizes the end of hostilities in the first World War (11/11, at 11 am). I remember going to parades in Denton, Texas with my grandparents on Veteran's Day. My grandfather was a World War I veteran and they always honored and observed the day with solemn gratitude.

## The Christian Citizen's Obligations

### Be in Subjection (Romans 13:1, 5)

**[1] Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities...** (and again) **[5] Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.**

Paul wrote those words to Christians living under the thumb of Rome. And for the last two thousand years, regardless of the form of government under which they have lived, Christians have understood these words to apply to them. It applies to us, today, who live in the United States of America.

Submission (or "*be in subjection*" - same thing) may not be the most popular word in the English language, but it is a very common word and theme in the New Testament. And, truth be told, submission is a hallmark of healthy relationships and it is the foundation for a life with God.

We are to live in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is God and we are not. We gladly bow before Him (James 4:7) and to be submissive to God means that we obey Him.

In the church, we are to "***be subject to one another.***" In the church, submission is not hierarchical. It is reciprocal. (Ephesians 5:21)

The reciprocity involved in submission within the church tells us that while "obey" may be a part of what is in view with submission - as it most certainly is in our relationship with God<sup>10</sup> - it is much more about an attitude we take toward the other person or the institution.

When Scripture challenges us to submit in any relationship, we are being challenged to put our strength, our resources, and whatever influence we have at the disposal of another, for that other's benefit.

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<sup>10</sup> Slaves are to submit to their masters (Titus 2:9). Another example where obedience is a part of submission.

Submission is a strong thing, an intelligent thing, a dynamic thing, a creative thing.

For instance, church members submit to their elders as they follow the elders' biblically sensitive direction to enhance the ministry of the church. AND they submit to their elders when they call them to accountability when the elders stray from wisdom or Scripture.

In both cases, the church is submitting. They are putting their resources to work to bless and to encourage the elders to fulfill their true stewardship. (See Hebrews 13:17)

Paul writes that in marriage, wives are to be subject to their husbands. A wife submits by using all the resources at her disposal to bless her husband and to call him to be the man God created him to be.

And - related to this morning's theme - citizens are to submit to the state. (Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13)

I take that to mean that we are to put our resources and influence to work to enhance our state's capacity to fulfill its stewardship to justly do what God established it to do:

- protect the innocent and obedient;
- punish the lawbreaker;
- defend the nation.

This call to submit to the government is not an uncritical call to blind obedience to the state's every command. Paul didn't mean that we should obey human government absolutely.

When the law of the land commands us to violate God's Law, we joyfully side with God - and take whatever consequences may come.<sup>11</sup> But aside from such extremes, we show our submission by obedience to the law.

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<sup>11</sup> We don't have time this morning to address civil disobedience, but we agree with the Apostle Peter, who said to the rulers of his day who were trying to convince him to stop spreading the Gospel of Christ, **[Acts 4:19] "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; [20] "for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."**

And as we submit, we pray.

Turning from Romans 13, we now listen to what Paul wrote to his younger brother in the faith, Timothy.

### **Pray (1 Timothy 2:1-2)**

***[1] First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, [2] for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.***

If we are going to be the people God's wants us to be in terms of earthly citizenship, we will pray for those who lead us.

Richard Wurmbrand, the founder of the Voice of the Martyrs ministry, spent fifteen years in Soviet prisons for being an outspoken Christian in Romania. While in prison, he regularly prayed for the state-sponsored jailers who beat him.

In nearly every issue of The Voice of the Martyrs magazine, you will read of persecuted Christians praying for their persecutors. Often they are praying for their state-sponsored persecutors.

Stories like this come our way from writers like Tom Doyle who tell of believers who live in lands dominated by our faith's opponents. These Christians pray fervently for the welfare of their rulers and for the salvation of their rulers.<sup>12</sup>

Christians through the ages have prayed for their governments and for their governmental leaders. We should pray for our leaders, too. And we will. This morning.

We believe that God hears our prayers and that He uses our prayers. Sometimes He changes things in response to our prayers and sometimes He changes us as we pray. Sometimes He does both.

But we can be confident that God is doing something in response to our fervent prayers for our leaders and for our government.

So, we pray. And here in the United States, with our representative form of government, we have the freedom to participate.

### **Participate**

*The freedoms our system allows...*

Here and in some other countries, Christians have the freedom to be involved in the political process in ways that people don't have in some countries.

For one, we can vote. Voting gives each of us the opportunity to have a hand in selecting our leaders. Voting is not a command, but it is a great privilege. Voting is one way that you, a Christian, can vote to place in office those who most nearly stand for the things that you stand for.

You can get involved in party politics, help set your party's platform, talk with your neighbors, run for office. You can use your first amendment right to free speech to advocate for your candidate and for the issues you believe in.

These are freedom we have that lots of people around the world don't have. But there are some freedoms we enjoy that are shared by all Christians everywhere.

*The opportunities all systems allow...*

We can all shine bright for Jesus and we can all lovingly "salt" our friends with the Gospel, and we can all permeate our relational circles with grace.

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<sup>12</sup> Doyle has written about the persecuted church in the Middle East. Check out [Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe.](#)

One of the problems is that when we think about government and politics, we are tempted to think big and grandiose. The reality is that far more impact is made small than big. Up close and personal is where lives are changed.

Another of the problems is that we are tempted to believe that the political process will change the culture. Many Christians believe this. The opposite is way more true. Culture influences politics far more than politics influences culture.<sup>13</sup>

And, again, we see the genius of Jesus in NOT addressing Himself to government. Instead, He told His followers about salt granules and leaven and mustard seeds.

He certainly wants us to be strong influences for good in our culture. But He knows that this influence will be more effective as it is more personal.

Just imagine the impact you would have on your friends if you simply shine bright for Jesus, love well, and shower grace everywhere you go. Now, imagine the impact if all of us lived that way. Talk about impact disproportionate to our size.

The story of any church is always the story of individuals whose lives are changed by Jesus. The story of a culture is the multiplied stories of lives touched by God - or not.

You and I are most effective in impacting culture when we worship, love, and serve in Jesus' Name.

### **Conclusion:**

We are living in a culture that is moving away from its former Bible-based, Christian moorings. That reality is one of the reasons I wanted to move through the Sermon on the Mount with you - to drive home that our true kingdom is not America and that our true king is Jesus.

That's why, back in the spring, I spoke to you from the book of Daniel. His cultural context was Babylon. Our context is becoming more Babylonian. We need to learn to thrive in Babylon.

But we need not fear. We will not fear.

Very soon, you and I will know who will be our governmental leaders for the next few years. But our LEADER will always be the same. He is our king; we are His citizen-ambassadors. In God, we trust.

So, we pray.

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<sup>13</sup> Corollary: America gets the leaders she deserves.