

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Salt and Light

(Impacting our world for Jesus)

The Pledges of Our Allegiance

(Romans 13:1-7)

Study #3

Introduction: Government at its best, and not...

Our Bibles tell us of Jesus' future one-thousand year reign on earth. This "Millennium" will be perfect. There will be perfect justice and perfect peace under the rule of a perfect King.¹

Jesus will rule as a Sovereign from Jerusalem over a kingdom characterized by the binding of Satan, global harmony, healed environments, long lifespans, and universal worship.

It'll be great....and we aren't living in the Millennium.

Now, in our own and in every other nation throughout time, there are glimpses of greatness and grace interspersed between long seasons of brokenness, tragedy, and wreckage.

That is because countries and states and cities are ruled by flawed people who oversee ruling governments. Governments do stuff.

¹ Read Isaiah 11:1-9 for a description of Jesus' kingdom. Isaiah includes reference to the righteous character of the King (vv. 2-5) and glorious peace that extends to humanity and even to the animal world. (vv. 6-9)

² Thinking about government at church is important, and tricky. It's tricky because, while we hold to a common base of understanding - the Bible - we will have differing opinions about government. It's also tricky to think about government because it requires us to think about the use (and the abuse) of power. America's

They make laws and enforce them. They judge guilt or innocence. They keep the peace and they make war. They build infrastructure, collect taxes, and oversee economic policies.

They may do all of these things elegantly or sloppily, slimily or justly. And, of necessity, we all deal with government.

We're taking a few weeks this summer to search the New Testament to learn how to be "**salt and light**" for Jesus.

So, I thought it would be helpful to devote one of these Sundays to thinking together about how our involvement with government can increase the saltiness and the brightness of our witness for Jesus.²

And - happy birthday! I hope that you enjoyed yesterday's celebration of our nation's 250th birthday with a party, with fireworks, great food - and prayer for our nation.

THIS being THAT weekend, I think the timing is especially fit to think about how to lead God-honoring lives under our government.

Turning to Romans...

Deep into the letter Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Rome, he addressed the theme of government in an important, but short, passage.

We'll spend the bulk of our time in that passage this morning, learning how to be "**salt and light**" for Jesus.

It is often said that Paul's letter to the Romans was the letter he wrote when he had the chance to reflect and the time to think it all through.³

first president, George Washington, said, "*Government is not about reason, it is not about eloquence. It is about force. Like fire, it is a dangerous and fearful master.*"

³ Other letters reflect haste. The spirit of his letter to the churches of Galatia is fiery and passionate. His short letter to his friend Philemon seems like a quick note jotted off to a friend.

By the time we get to Romans 13, Paul had already done a deep dive to explain the Gospel of grace - that we are saved by faith alone in Jesus alone - and to describe the Christian's life in the Spirit.

He had affirmed God's continuing plans for the people of Israel. He had also given instruction as to how to lead a God-honoring life as a part of a vibrant faith community.

Then he may have paused to take a deep breath, before launching into this section. Here he tells us how we in this faith community are to interact with the secular state.

His first comment is blunt, stark, and straight to the point.

The Nature of Human Government (Romans 13:1-2)

The Legitimate Authority of Government (13:1)

Christians are to be subject to government (v. 1a)

[1a] Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities.⁴

That's a mouthful, especially when we remember to whom Paul was writing.

He wrote to Christians living in the city of Rome - and told them to submit to imperial Rome.

For the last two thousand years, regardless of the form of government under which they have lived, Christians have understood that these words apply to them. These words apply to us, today, who live in the USA.

Our faith does not exempt us from "***being subject***" to government. Our faith requires it.

⁴ Some who read these words have wondered if there was a sense of urgency about this topic of church-state relations for the Roman Christians of Paul's day, in light

Then, Paul made a blanket statement about "***authority.***"

There is no authority except God (v. 1b)

[1b] For there is no authority except from God.

Before there was anything else in the universe (before there even was a universe!), there was God. In the beginning, He was the only power, and His power created all there is.

He is still the energizing power of everything. He is the sovereign authority behind and above every other authority.

Therefore, all human power is derived and delegated, not inherent or intrinsic. That applies to authority and power in the home, in the church, at work, and in the state.

It's important that we remember this. Any human government's power is derived from God.

In fact, God is the One who ordained the whole institution of human government.

Governments are established by God (v. 1c)

[1c]...and those which exist are established by God.

God has established the institution of human government for our protection.

The absence of government is *anarchy*, (the word means, "*no ruler*") and anarchy is the worst of all possible societal arrangements. Government is God's solution to anarchy.

Human "***authorities***" - governments - have a God-ordained stewardship to fulfill, and Paul will fill in the blanks on what some of that stewardship is all about as we move through this passage.

of official persecution they may have been suffering, and in light of the more intense suffering that was soon to come their way.

Some governments do a remarkably good job at fulfilling the stewardship God has given them. Some fail miserably.

Paul was certainly not saying here that God is responsible for the atrocities committed by the world's governments and leaders. God did not appoint Hitler or Mao. And He wasn't the driving force behind American slavery.

No, He established the institution of government to bless humanity. But, because all governments are led by flawed and broken men and women, there will always be a good bit of wreckage and messiness and injustice everywhere.

When Paul said what he did here about "*authorities*" being established by God, we might wonder if he was looking at the world through rose-colored glasses.

Not at all.

In fact, he wrote what we have just read not long after he was mistreated by Roman authorities at Philippi (See Acts 16).

When he wrote this letter to the Romans, the emperor in power was a guy named Nero. The Christians in Rome were only a few years away from experiencing the worst of Nero's persecutions.

And then (if I have my chronology right) the Apostle Peter wrote pretty much the same thing Paul wrote right in the middle of Nero's persecutions.

[1 Peter 2:13] Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, [14] or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

⁵ I don't think that Paul would have restricted the application of his words to only certain forms of government. And he sure didn't lay out here what he saw as the "best" form of government is. What he wrote applies to all governments and to all those who live under all governments - including us, today. And if he did express an opinion about the superior form of government, I have no confidence that he

So, the Bible's command to "*be subject to*" governing authorities is not tied to only those governments that are friendly to Christians, or only to those governments that are righteous and just.

Rome was pagan through and through. It was brutal and sometimes unjust. But both Peter and Paul knew that it was part of the system God had put in place to protect against anarchy. Christians were therefore to be subject to it.

If you were a Christian today, living in North Korea, Romans 13:1-2 would apply to you.

You would be obligated to "*be subject to*" (to obey) the rule of that communist, totalitarian [hereditary] dictatorship...
...as long as that obedience didn't interfere with your obedience to King Jesus. (And we'll hear that thought again today.)

Again, while some governments carry out their stewardship better than others do, governments - generally - are God's means to provide for our protection.

For that reason, opposing government is a very bad idea. To oppose government is to oppose an institution to which God has delegated authority.⁵

The Peril of Opposition to Government (v. 2)

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

Those words apply to lawbreakers of all stripes: thieves, jaywalkers, and murderers. We break the laws of the state at our peril.

would list a participatory government like a democracy or a republic. My suspicion is that, given an option, Paul would say that a benevolent dictatorship is the preferred form of government. After all, when God sets up a government - The Millennium - Jesus will rule alone, reigning as a just and benevolent Sovereign.

Paul builds on his thoughts about the *nature* of government to now speak to the proper *function* of government.

The Proper Role of Government (vv. 3-4)

Government's Role as Protector (13:3-4a)

[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; [4a] for it is a servant of God to you for good.

We read those words and may hear them as high praise for every government. But Paul would never have argued that Rome was flawless in its judgments.

He knew that while Roman government brought benefits, Rome sometimes violated justice. There were downsides to Roman rule. It was not perfect.

So maybe we should read Paul's words here as we understand Solomon's words in Proverbs. They are a description of the way the world *generally* works. Or even of how the world *should* work.

If that's the better way to read this (as I think it is), then Paul's point is that for the most part, law-abiding people aren't hassled by the government.

Sure, there are violations of justice in our own and in most countries, from time to time. When these violations happen, it is tragic. But, again, all governments are led by sinners, so there will be injustices and failures and missteps.

But proverbially speaking, Paul is generally correct. If you keep the law, "[Government] is *USUALLY* a servant of God to you for good. [Government] is *SUPPOSED TO BE* a servant of God to you for good."

It is definitely a benefit to have a government over us. It beats anarchy. It isn't *ONLY* beneficial or *ALWAYS* 100% beneficial, but generally beneficial.⁶

In light of this, we are grateful for the benefits of the state, including the state under which you and I live.

Today, in our country, by using the money we pay in taxes, the city, state, and federal governments provide public transportation, electric service, water and gas utilities, streets, bridges, and sewers.

Our armed services protect us from hostile enemies. Police protect us from harm here in San Antonio. Firefighters are front-line servants.

Plus, there is a social safety-net in place that offers help to the vulnerable.

The state provides what citizens would have a tough time doing on their own.

And, since the alternative to government is anarchy (a non-system in which only the strong win), we are blessed to have the institution of government.

Paul saw the Roman state in his day as God's appointed means of protecting the world from chaos. Government is God's means for doing the same, today, for us.

The corollary to this function of the state, of course, is that it has the God-ordained right and responsibility to punish those who break its laws. It isn't only a protector; it's a punisher.

What God has forbidden to the Christian - vengeance (Romans 12:17-21) - He grants to the state.

⁶ I would submit that to the extent that this is not the case, to that extent that government is not fulfilling its stewardship before God. And to that extent, that government will, eventually, be judged by God.

Government's Role as Punisher (13:4b)

[4b]...But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Paul was writing about government's treatment of lawbreakers.

Again, tragically, a government may sometimes punish unjustly. The innocent are sometimes tried and convicted. That's the problem with government being run by flawed people.

But flawed humans have a mandate from God to do the best they can to justly and appropriately punish the guilty.⁷

That's all the groundwork for understanding the rationale and the responsibilities of government. Paul now brings us to the "so what" for you and me.

In what follows, Paul spells out our responsibilities to those authorities, reverting to what he said at the beginning about "***being subject.***"

Giving Government Its Dues (vv. 5-7a)

Government Deserves Our Submission (v. 5)

[5] Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience.

⁷ "The proper function of a government is to make it easy for the people to do good, and difficult for them to do evil." (Daniel Webster, The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster: Diplomatic Papers and Miscellaneous Letters. As I understand it, these are the two explicit purposes of government. For a government to take on additional tasks would not be anti-biblical, but it is not the explicit reason for which God established the state.

⁸ All Christians are to submit to one another. (Ephesians 5:21) Wives are to submit to husbands. (Ephesians 5:22) Slaves are to submit to masters. (Titus 2:9) Church members are to submit to their elders. (Hebrews 13:17) Christians are all to submit to Jesus.

The theme of submission is a major biblical theme.⁸ Here, Paul says that we are to "***be subject to***" the state.⁹

And the thought here is, pretty simply, obey the law. Do what the state says to do, unless... (and we'll get to the "unless..." shortly.)

You and I live under a very different government than Paul did. Ours is a participatory government, a representative democracy.

So, some of the challenges we face are different from those that Paul and his friends faced. And "***being subject***" in the United States in 2026 includes some things that it didn't include in the first century.¹⁰

For one, I think it is reasonable to see voting as a way to not only participate, but also to "***be subject***" to our government. We use wisdom and discernment to vote for men and women to whom we will subject ourselves as they lead our government.¹¹

But we also show our submission when we obey the laws of our land, even when no one is watching.

And we live in subjection to authority when we obey laws with which we may even disagree...*unless* the state's law prohibits us from doing what God commands or commands us to do what God forbids.

For instance.

In the days of Moses, the Hebrew midwives were law-abiding Egyptian slaves...until Pharaoh commanded that they kill every infant male Hebrew. Then, they obeyed God rather than man. (Exodus 1)

⁹ See also Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13 for the same thought.

¹⁰ It seems to me that in our context, being subject to authority can mean anything from passivity to full involvement in the governmental process.

¹¹ It also seems reasonable to me to say that Christians who are subject to "***authority***" should speak about our authorities respectfully, even when they disagree. See what Paul wrote to his friend, Titus, along these lines: ***[Titus 3:1] Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, [2] to slander no one...***

Daniel's friends - Meschach, Shadrach, and Abed-nego - were high-ranking officials in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Empire.

I'm sure that they were law-abiding citizens. They obeyed the king's every command...until that day came when he commanded them to bow down and worship the golden image of himself that he had set up on the plains of Shinar.

To that command, they said, *"You're commanding that we cross a line that we won't cross. We'll obey you, O king, in everything you command except when your command forces us to disobey the command of our KING."*

They didn't bow down. They chose to obey their KING. They accepted the king's punishment - and were thrown into a fiery furnace to be consumed. (Spoiler alert: God rescued them; Daniel 3)

Daniel himself was a loyal, law-obeying subject of King Darius. But he didn't obey Darius' command that everyone in the kingdom had to pray only to him. Daniel prayed to God and accepted the punishment of being thrown into a lion's den. (And, again, God spared Daniel; see Daniel 6)

The apostles Peter and John were law-abiding Jews who chose to disobey the Jewish Sanhedrin (the Jews' Supreme Court) when that court commanded them to stop preaching Jesus.

The apostles' response when the Jewish leaders gave their command was in perfect alignment with the Hebrew midwives, with Daniel's friends, and with Daniel himself.

[Acts 4:19] "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, make your own judgment; [20] for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."

¹² That is because, as we have seen, government's power is derived, delegated power. Only God's power is inherent and absolute.

Seeing all of that, we understand that here in Romans 13, Paul's call to ***"be subject"*** to governmental ***"authority"*** was not a call to an uncritical, blind obedience to the state's every command.

He would never say that we are to obey human government *absolutely*.

If our state's laws ever command us to violate God's Law, we are to joyfully side with God over government - accepting whatever punishment may come.¹²

We would say what Peter said in another exchange with the Jewish leaders. ***[Acts 5:29] "We must obey God rather than men."***

Paul's next instruction would be especially fitting to read around the middle of April, because here Paul mentions taxes.

Paul casts this part of life as a part of our willing subjection to governing authorities. Government has the right to levy taxes, and we are obliged to pay them.

Government Deserves Our Tax Money (13:6-7a)

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

The Christians in Rome were to pay their taxes. We in San Antonio are to pay our taxes.¹³

Paul didn't put a limit on the level of taxation. He didn't justify or nullify a certain kind of tax. He simply affirms that we are to pay our taxes.

Paying our taxes is an important way to ***"be subject"*** to God and to His order.

¹³ Paul grants us the grace of perspective. We understand the place of civil authority in God's plan. They are servants of God (even if they don't know it.)

I know. Your federal, state, and local taxes go to some causes that you'd rather not support. I get it. Me, too. That has always been the case. It was in Paul's day, too. We are still to pay our taxes.

Maybe you disagree with the current tax code? Maybe you'd like to see tax reform? Maybe you're bothered by the fact that our current tax code is, to use a technical term, a "wreck"? Pay your taxes.

Have you read on the Internet about ways to get out of paying taxes, about how paying taxes are unconstitutional? Pay your taxes.

Are you tempted to argue that you are exempt from paying taxes because you are a citizen of heaven? Resist that temptation. Pay your taxes.

And with that, we come to the end of Paul's brief discussion of government.

Tacked on to the end of his comments about the state, our submission to it, and dealing with the IRS and the Bexar County Tax Assessor-Collector, he adds this final thought.

Giving God His Due (13:7b)

[7b] Pay to all what is due them...respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

Lots of scholars who read those final two phrases take them as urging us to "**fear**" higher government officials and to "**honor**" the less lofty governmental rulers.

I get that. This passage is all about the Christian's relationship to the state. It makes sense that Paul would end with instructions to "**respect / fear / revere**"¹⁴ and "**honor**" our rulers.

But there is a long tradition of thought that there may be something else going on here.

Some believe that as Paul wrapped up, after urging that we give both submission and taxation to the state, he shifted gears and focused on God at the end, telling us to "**fear**" and to "**honor**" God.¹⁵

I see merit in this way of looking at Paul's conclusion. It explains why I gave this morning's message its title: "**The PLEDGES - plural - of Our Allegiance.**"

We pledge our allegiance to our earthly homeland AND we pledge our allegiance to God.

And thinking biblically about these two pledges reveals our faith at its most basic, most radical, and most extreme.

Conclusion:

Think back to what Jesus said when He was asked if Jews should pay tax to Caesar.

Here is His answer to those who were trying to trap Him: ***[Mark 12:7] "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."***

In other words, "*By all means pay Caesar's tax. The tax money belongs to him. The coins have his image on them. Give Caesar his money. But you have the image of God stamped on you. Give yourself to God!*"¹⁶

We who believe in Jesus have dual citizenship. We are citizens of an earthly kingdom. We are citizens of heaven. (Philippians 3:20)

Without question, our heavenly citizenship is primary; the earthly is secondary.

¹⁴ This is the range of meaning of the Greek word used here. (*φοβος*, phobos)

¹⁵ This understanding dates back to Chrysostom, who lived in the late 300's AD.

¹⁶ The Apostle Peter affirmed the same thing when he wrote, ***[1 Peter 2:17]...fear God; honor the king.***

YES, we have an obligation to obey human authorities.

AND we will give an order of magnitude higher loyalty to God, who is the gracious Power who established those authorities.

YES, we admit to the reality of politics and engage with it - as individuals - to the extent that it makes sense for each of us before God.

AND we gladly affirm that nothing - not fame or money or success or popularity or acclaim - compares to the joy and fulfillment that comes from simply serving Jesus.

AND will we, as a church, never engage in partisan politics. On a Sunday morning, you'll never hear me engage in partisan politics, nor will we, as a church, be tied to any political party, nor will we tie our comfort or distress to which candidates are elected or which party is in control. We will trust in God.

AND we will aim to maintain an *"allegiance to Jesus"* culture on Sundays and in all of our small groups settings and whenever we gather. We'll interact with each other with sensitivity on polarizing issues related to government, remembering that our unity hinges on the Lord Jesus, not on politics or anything else.

We pledge allegiance to earthly authorities unless...
...they command us to do what Jesus forbids.
...they forbid us to do what Jesus commands.

We pledge our highest allegiance to the Lord Jesus.

With respect to our government, we pray that there will be a government in place that will allow us to be free to be ***"salt and light."***

That was the essence of the instruction Paul gave to Timothy.

[1 Timothy 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, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

We will seek to be the saltiest salt and to shine as the brightest lights we can to a world in need.

What our world is looking for and what it needs to see are Christians...

...who lead exemplary lives.

...who are moved by compassion to meet needs in Jesus' name.

...who pray and serve and give.

...who are all about Jesus and His mission to love, to share the Gospel and to make disciples.

That's what a ***"salt and light"*** Christian and a ***"salt and light"*** church looks like.