

Loyalties
Rev. Elizabeth Lyman
July 1, 2018

Romans 12:9-21. Romans 13: 1-2, 8-10

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;[g] for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

13 1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ... 8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 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, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

I don't remember the last time a biblical citation generated so many headlines.

Two weeks ago, Attorney General Jeff Sessions sought to defend the Trump administration's immigration policies, especially with regard to separating families. At one point, he stated, "I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes."

His citation set off a firestorm of debate in the culture and among Christians. As we come to the time we celebrate the nation's 242nd birthday, we need to ask. What does a text like this mean to us today?

In First Timothy, Paul urged that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions" (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

His instruction to Christians living in Rome was clear: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment*" (Romans 13:1-2).

The apostle then stated that "the authorities are ministers of God" (v. 6) and urged his readers: "*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*" (v. 7).

Peter added: "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good*" (1 Peter 2:13-14).

It would seem clear, then, that Christians are to submit to the authority of the government, seeing its exercise of power as God's will for us. However, there's more to the story.

First, Paul is writing to a very small church in Rome, to actively disobey would have meant death for many of the congregation. It is a time of radical, violent oppression of any opposing thought. Paul writes to continue on with those things that keep you out of the sight of authorities.

Second, this is written at a time of dictatorship. It is not written in a republic where WE are supposed to be the government. As Lincoln said, "Of the people, by the people, for the people."

AG Sessions used this scripture in a way that implies that government is something outside of our individual responsibility.

But Scripture has much more to say about our responsibilities as people of faith.

In Acts 4, Peter and John were ordered to stop preaching the gospel by the Sanhedrin, the highest authority in Judaism. Their response: "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard*" (vv. 19-20).

After Peter was arrested again for preaching the gospel, he was again bold in his civil disobedience: "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). His faithfulness to God led to his martyrdom by Rome. Paul suffered a similar fate: imprisonment (2 Timothy 4:6) and execution.

And so, two apostles who counseled Christians to obey the state were executed because they would not obey the state.

Theirs are not the only such stories in Scripture.

In Daniel 3, the Babylonian king erected a golden image and required all people to worship it. The Jewish exiles Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego testified before the idolatrous king: "We will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (v. 18). You know what happened to them.

Three chapters later, Daniel refused to pray to the Persian king and was thrown into the lions' den as a result.

In Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted: "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." He agreed with St. Augustine, who claimed that "an unjust law is no law at all."

John R. W. Stott was one of the most respected conservative, evangelical theologians of the twentieth century. In his commentary on Romans 13, he asks:

"Granted that the authority of the rulers is derived from God, what happens if they abuse it, if they reverse their God-given duty, commending those who do evil and punishing those who do good? Does the requirement to submit still stand in such a morally perverse situation? No. The principle is clear. We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God."

You and I are citizens of two countries. We live in a secular nation with secular leaders we are to support and obey. But we also live in a spiritual society with an omnipotent King whose authority is supreme (Psalm 2:10-11).

Jesus taught us to "*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*" (Matthew 22:21).

But when we are forced to choose, we must obey our highest authority.

Romans 13 should never be used without paying close attention to what surrounds it. By itself, this text has been used for everything from the justification of slavery to the Christian churches in Germany who chose to support Hitler. It is a dangerous text to use out of context.

You need to move back from that small part to see the larger picture. What does Paul bookend this text with? With love. Right before this Paul says,

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

And immediately following the government passage, Paul continues, *"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ 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, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Our highest authority is to the God of Love. The God who loved us so much that He sent His only Son to save – not just Americans – but all His people.

This Independence Day – let us remember what it means when we pledge; *one nation under God.*

Amen