

GOVERNMENT AND BAD BEHAVIOR

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We're all brought up with rules that our parents give us, or our society provided us with to guide us. One of the rules that we were brought up with in Ireland was, if you meet a stranger, and you want to have a good relationship with him, there are two things you don't talk about; religion or politics.

So we've been talking for the past month at least about both religion and politics and therefore, it's amazing we're still friends! Except that when you have a dear book like this (Bible) that contains the very thoughts of our Creator about how we should live, and when you have a body of loved ones who have received his Spirit into their lives to run them, it's really not surprising that we're still friends, because here, our task is -- "I want to understand this better", isn't it?

Our task is not, "I am defending truth." (Martin) Luther said, "I would as soon defend a roaring lion as defend the Bible." We don't need to defend God's truth or defend the Bible. We need to try to find out what it's saying to us. And that's what makes these Sundays enjoyable instead of kind of tense, and I think we all feel that -- his truth stands. We may understand it partially, we may understand it fully, but his truth stands, and we all have to bow down humbly and say, "We see through a glass darkly, but there'll come a time when we'll see face-to-face."

Nevertheless, it is a delicate task to try to express to one another what the Christian's attitude to government and to politics and the civil authorities should be, exactly as the Bible explains it. Especially a delicate task in our day, when what seems to be said in this chapter of Romans that we're reading, appears to run slap up against two tendencies in our present society. One tendency is the strong, secular tendency to give up on the government; to opt out of the system, to take part in a bartering system in order to avoid the income taxes, to take part, even, in some parts of the country, in vigilante activities -- because we can no longer depend on the government to protect the ordinary citizen.

The tendency to think that, "Well, the government isn't working and we would be better not paying it the taxes that it thinks is owed." So you have that strong secular tendency. Then you have another strong Christian tendency today that feels that you should use the legitimate means of lobbying and of special interest group pressure on Congressmen, and of block votes to try to get the government to write into our laws certain Christian values regarding abortion and regarding school prayer in schools.

So you have those two strong tendencies. And they come up against this word that we've got from God in Romans 13 and this word seems to cut across those. If you look at it, you'll see why I say that; Romans 13:1-3, "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 he who resist the authorities resist what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval." That seems to us, in our present atmosphere, a little too passive and submissive.

So I think what we're facing is a real test of your trust and love and submission to me, as your Pastor and your guide, in understanding the Bible, and what I am facing is a real desire to express my love and my submission to the Creator in finding out how to express what God appears to be

saying, in a way that we will all understand.

So as an Irish immigrant -- I am a citizen now, but I am still an Irish immigrant -- I'll begin. Seems to me that the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights, are remarkable documents. I think the whole world accepts that. The men that wrote them seem to be inspired with incredible insight, incredible wisdom and incredible foresight. When you look at those documents it's easy to believe what Paul said about rulers; he said, "Rulers are instituted by God." When you read those documents, you feel, "These men surely must have been touched by God as they wrote these documents." And yet the fact that the 21st amendment repealed the 18th amendment, suggest that at least the amendments, or the articles, are not infallible, that they are not unchanging.

Indeed, when you examine the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution itself, you have to face the fact that at the end of the day, these are the products of men's minds -- the best products they could produce -- but they are the products of men's minds. They are designed to enable a group of people in a certain situation to live together in peace, but they are the product of men's minds, many of whom laid no claim to be Christian. Maybe it's good for us, in our justified admiration for these incredible documents, to see that these dear men, many of them, did not lay claim to be Christians. Many of them were deists and theists, but many of them weren't Christian. Therefore, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the Bill of Rights, must take second place to this dear book (the Bible) as far as the guidance of our own lives and behavior is concerned.

In other words, here we must stand with Paul when he said to the people who arrested him, "We must obey God rather than men." However great the men are, however enlightened they are, however inspired they were, "we must obey God rather than men." In other words loved ones, it's vital that you and I, as God's children, interpret the Constitution of the United States by the spirit of the Bible, that we interpret the Declaration of Independence by the spirit of the Bible, not -- we interpret the Bible by the Constitution of the United States. It is vital that we must be filled first with the spirit of the Bible of God's words and then go to our own Constitution and put that always second, as far as the guidance for our lives are concerned.

Now, how does that apply to us? Well, just think of the Declaration of Independence; "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Not so as far as God's word is concerned. Look again at Romans 13:1, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God." We may say they derive their power from the consent of the governed and therefore, in a way, if you followed it right through, when the governed refused to consent to be governed, they can no longer be governed. That's why many of us say right in the heart of the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution, anarchy is written, in a sense. We were so anxious to guard ourselves against the domination that we felt from the King of Great Britain that we felt we must in some way give the people their rightful power.

So the men wrote in "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The Bible says, "No, the power does not come from the consent of the governed, the power comes from God -- all authority is from God. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government."

Well, not so in Romans 13:1 where it says, "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 the people? No, "Those that exist have been instituted by God."

Now you may say, "Oh you're quarrelling over words. It's God behind the people." No, there is a difference; the one is a Godly document, the other is primarily a humanist document based on belief in a god. Now you may say, "Well then is the Constitution wrong?" No, that's not the issue. The Constitution was written to govern a group of people in a particular land; the Bible is written to govern the body of Jesus. But it is true that the Constitution is a tract for the times -- a written product of men's minds to justify their rejection of the tyranny of the King of Great Britain and their desire to give to the people the right to overthrow any such tyranny if it ever occurred. You can understand why they did that, but you can see too, that in a way, there is built into that an excuse for anarchy -- almost an excuse to overthrow any government that you're not happy or you're not satisfied with.

If you and I ever put the people into that position of power in our own minds in regard to our government, we are deifying people, where the Bible deifies God. In other words, we are not to put our trust in Princes, and we are not to put our trust even in this dear people that fills our land. We are to put our trust in our God who has produced these authorities and who will guard us and protect us, in so far as we respect Him and we respect them.

There is, loved ones, a real difference between the way the Bible looks at government and the way even our own Declaration looks at it. Now, it is true that the Declaration tried to guard us against anarchy, because it says that while the people have the right to institute new government, laying it's foundation on such principles and organizing it's power in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness, then it says, "prudence and deed will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes."

The writers of the Declaration try to guard us against taking to the streets every time we disagree with the government. But I think you'll agree, the "light and transient causes", like so many other phrases in the Constitution, is open to a lot of interpretation. One group can say, "The fight in the Vietnam War is not such a light and transient cause" and another group can say, "The ridiculous taxes that we have are not light and transient causes."

So there's every reason for us, as a body of Christians, interpreting the Constitution in the light of the Bible. Because the Bible, strangely enough, brings in a corrective which makes the Constitution work. Now which corrective? Well, you're all familiar with the first article -- the first amendment: "The right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." That's basic, you see. The British parliament can bring down the government with a vote of no-confidence, we can't, but we have this "right of the people, peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Presumably that was written because of the King. It says "he has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of the public records, for the sole purpose of taking them into compliance with his measures. He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly for opposing with manly firmness his invasion on the right of the people. He has refused for a long time after such dissolutions to cause others to be elected."

So in all kinds of ways, the man(the King of England) was making it impossible for us to do anything

here in this country ,so we wrote into the Constitution the right of the people, even in that situation, "peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." The difficulty is that if that is retained simply to petition the government for the long history of abuses, and usurpations that they accused the King of England of, then it's good and it's right. But if that right of the people to assemble and to petition government is used for light and transient causes, then instead of duly elected representatives who vote by their conscience, and have time and opportunity to consider seriously the decisions that are to be made, instead of that, if we misuse this right to petition and misuse this right -- to pressure by powerful lobbies and by block votes, even by mass marches and by barricades in the Vietnam days -- we then can turn our duly elected officials into men who are intimidated by our actions, and are pressured into responding to the loudest voice that calls to them. Instead of a group of men who are able in peace to discuss things, you have a group of men who are afraid that their job will be taken from them the next moment. The result is "Pork Barrel" legislation to keep themselves in power.

How does the Bible guard against that? By today's verse, if you like to look at it. It's Romans 13:4, "for he is God's servant for your good." That's interesting. Even the order of the Greek because it emphasizes the predicated; it's "Theos gar diakonos esti" -- "of God, for the servant, or the minister, he is." For, "of God, the servant is he." He is God's servant. He is God's minister. Who is? Nero? Those rulers that are mentioned? You remember in Romans 13:3, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct." A man like Nero who burnt the Christians alive? The Sanhedrin who crucified Jesus and had Steven stoned -- are those the servants of God? No, its interesting, if you look at Romans 13:3, the subject changes.

Romans 13:3, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive", and actually the word is "outes" in Greek. It is not "his", it is "it's." "Then do what is good and you will receive it's approval." So that throws you into the next word, not being he but "it", "For it is God's servant for your good" -- the authority is.

Paul didn't know that he would be executed by the Romans but he did know that his Savior was. And he did not look at Nero or the particular personality that represented the government,he looked beyond that personality to the authority that God had established there to prevent us falling into anarchy. He had his faith in that authority and in God's ability to rule those who were his servants. Now that transforms our attitude to our own government; no longer do we begin to think the only way we can change things is by self-willed, self-powered political movement to pressure them into action. Now we begin to give them the patient trust of voters who voted them into power, which is a powerful lobby -- in fact the most powerful lobby, except one, that you could have -- the patient trust of voters who put them in power and give them peace to do their job for the set amount of time that they have.

The second is really the greatest lobbyist of all; you exercise faith in the God who established this authority and is able to restrain and control it according to our prayers and our faith in him. So loved ones, it takes us out of the streets and takes us away from our own attempts to try to control the government other than by vote and by our prayers, and it seems that this is part of what God is saying.

Maybe it would be good just to finish on this; Paul says in Romans 13:4, "For he is God's servant for your good." Who is he speaking to? Is he speaking to all the citizens of the United States? No. Is he speaking to the United Nations? No. Is he speaking to politicians and rulers? No. Is he

outlining here a plan for some kind of government that will work throughout the world? No, he isn't. Is he giving us a plan that will solve all the present political problems that we find in the diverse governments that exist in the world? No. Paul is talking to a very narrow group of people --he is talking to the body of Jesus -- he is talking to Christians. He is saying, "This is right for you whose only reason for existence is bringing people into Jesus. This is what you are to do. You've to regard this authority as God's servant for you. You've to pray for them, exercise your vote, but you've to get on with bringing others into the kingdom."

If you say to me, "Don't you think then that dictators will spring up everywhere throughout the world who will depend on this passive submission attitude of people to them, whether they do right or wrong?" No, it's not so. For one thing Jesus said only the minority of people will obey this word -- throughout the existence of the world, only the minority will obey this word. For another reason, God has other plans for restraining the secular authorities and indeed, he specifically states that the job of the church is not that. The job of the church is to redeem men's souls through the power of the Spirit. The job of the civil authorities is to restrain excessive authority by the power of law. So, no, if every Christian, if every child of God, if every member of the body of Jesus exercises their vote faithfully, and prays and has faith in God's ability to restrain and to govern the authorities and gets on with the main task that he was brought into the world for -- to bring people to Jesus, it doesn't necessarily mean that the world will become dominated by tyrants. Because God has all kinds of other powers in the depths of his own secret counsels for holding back such action.

The fact is, loved ones, that as far as we are concerned, we exist for one purpose as the body of Jesus; and that is to bring loved ones into a willing submission to Jesus through the power of the Spirit. And our only responsibility to the government apart from that, is the vote, and the prayer, or the running for office as God guides us.

Maybe just about three minutes of questions.

Q:<inaudible>

A:I agree. I think it's our responsibility to say what we feel, for instance, about abortion. It seems to me that's part of the system and part of the process. We are meant to write too. We are meant to write to our Senators and write to our Congressmen and make them aware. It seems that when we go over that tricky line where it begins to be intimidation, that's where it seems to me, we're sowing the seeds of anarchy and beginning to undermine our own democratic system of one-man one-vote. Even if everybody else is doing it, it seems to me it's our responsibility to stay within the spirit of the democratic system. It seems to me to be -- vote them in for the period of time, write letters to them, even call them, that kind of thing. But it's when it gets into intimidation or block vote pressure, that it seems to me we're then taking the sword into our hands.

Q:<inaudible>

A:Phyllis is pointing out that isn't it true that when you sign, for instance, a petition or you take part in some kind of mass representation like that, isn't it true that it's often the other things that are tacked on that you aren't really in agreement with, but you sign and appear to support them because your particular view is expressed also?

I think that's right, but what I think what is more dangerous is allying ourselves with Egypt. I

think there is no one but Jesus that we follow. And it seems to me that every time we identify with other issues, or other people besides Jesus, we are in danger of being identified with the world outside Christ, and with a spirit and methods and a lack of love that do not express Jesus. I have one great concern in all this present contemporary discussion; I am thinking of the little girl of 13 who doesn't know nothing about nothing and is having a baby and all the wee soul knows is abortion. I am against it -- I agree with you -- but it is vital that whatever we do, we somehow manage to get our love to that little one. It's very important that we don't appear simply as the self-righteous, religious group that says, "Do what you like, but you have to have it." Now the wee soul ought to have the baby, but that has to be ministered from a loving body of Jesus, not hammered into her by the power of law, and that's my concern -- that we continue to appear as Jesus himself was; a loving, kindly, gentle person who had strong beliefs about what was right and wrong, but who above all came over to people as love, and not as the insensitive power of government.

Probably what we're saying is; how do we get to that -- we want to get to that. So I encourage you to think about these things, and pray about them and see this one thing above all others; this all will pass away. It'll all pass and they'll bring the abortion back in, and they'll take the abortion out, just as they brought the alcohol in and took it out. It'll come and go, that's all a passing façade, but Jesus is forever. We have just a few years here on earth to get people to receive Jesus, and it seems to me we need to seek first his kingdom above everything else, do his will, and refuse to be sidetracked.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for your great kind heart. We thank you for this dear word, this dear Bible. Lord, we thank you that we can go home today, not necessarily feeling the last word has been said, just feeling we want to know what your word says, Lord. We want to absorb it, we want to receive its spirit into our hearts. We want to allow its beauty to shine forth in our lives. So Lord, we thank you for your dear word and we thank you for the Spirit of Jesus who is able to hold strongly to right, as opposed to wrong, when he told the woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more," but yet was able to express to her that loving kindness that brought all of us to you when you said, "Neither do I condemn." So Lord we pray that you will show us how to be like that and how to express that.

The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.