

## Government and Good Behaviour

Romans 13:03

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

During the past few weeks, we have been discussing what our attitude should be to the government and to civil authority and we've been doing that because we've arrived at that point in our study of the book of Romans. It's this particular chapter that we have arrived at, that deals with this topic but I think all of us would probably agree that it is a pretty topical subject.

The tax revolt in California is perhaps the most obvious expression of defiance by ordinary citizens against what they see as the excessive growth and the ever-increasing influence of government in the individual lives of people, but actually there are many examples today in our country of citizens who have kind of given up on the government and have taken the situation into their own hands.

So it's appropriate for us to be clear in our minds, as far as we can understand it, what God wants us to think of for the government and what attitude he wants us to take. If you just think for a minute of the underground bartering system that operates in our society -- you know it's widespread. It's an underground bartering system whereby we exchange goods and services with each other to avoid what many of us believe is an unfair tax system, and yet you wonder if that is right. Then you think of the groups of vigilantes that have been formed in different areas of the country. They carry guns and are prepared to use them because they feel the legal system has let them down and is no longer effective in protecting the property and the rights and the safety of ordinary individual citizens.

Then you'll think of Christians. Think of how many Christians have set up their own school system and have actually won the right to educate their children at home because of the Godlessness of the study for truth that is being pursued in our state school system. And you think of the hundreds of people that use demonstration marches and mass marches to try to prevent the administration policies being implemented on things like nuclear power plants or nuclear weapons. And of course you can see that all of those are, in a way, subtle evasions, certainly, of the government and of its rule over us.

So it is important for us to be clear what we believe God wants us to think of our government. And loved ones, at least the spirit of what he wants us to think is clearly stated in some verses that we've been studying. Maybe you would look at them in Romans 13:1-2. "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 resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment."

So the heart of it is to show respect and submit to your government, because civil authority is something that God himself maintains to keep the world in order. And actually the very authorities that govern your country have been instituted by him so if you resist them, you are resisting God and you will receive punishment or judgment for that.

The ones that we mentioned at the beginning were the people who had kind of opted out of the system, but it's interesting that at the other end of the spectrum, there are people who think, "Oh yeah, we shouldn't opt out of the system like that by an underground bartering system or our own schools or

other methods. We should control and correct the system." So there are large groups of us that use the block vote and the massive lobbying campaign to try to correct or control the system.

So you have the banking lobby effort where the great banking industry used its massive financial resources to influence politicians through a great mailing campaign in connection with the administration's plan to introduce income tax withholding on dividends. You have the same thing, in a way, operating in connection with subjects like abortions. These are groups of us that decide, "Yes, you shouldn't opt out of the system; you should try to control the system by massive lobbying campaigns and particular special interest group efforts." And what you have to do is to try to set all that alongside the spirit of Romans 13:1-2. We'll all probably take some time settling the details -- but the spirit is interesting, isn't it?

The spirit of Romans 13:1-2 is, "respect your government, submit to it, because civil authority is something that is being maintained by God to keep anarchy from overcoming us. So I want you to submit even to the very authorities that are in your present government, because those very authorities have been instituted by God, and if you resist those, you're resisting God and you'll incur judgment."

Now why does God say that? Well, the answer is in the next verse loved ones, if you look at it, it's Romans 13:3, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" -- that's why. In a way he is saying, because rulers, on the whole, are for good conduct. Maybe not in every detail, but on the whole they are on the side of the good guys, because God has appointed them. And on the whole, they are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.

A Lutheran commentator, Richard C.H. Lenski has put it like this -- and the important quotation is the one he gives of Luther -- Lenski says, "The world is full of wicked men and God has placed rulers among them to check and to control this wickedness by means of laws and penalties, all of them being directed, not against good deeds, but against evil deeds."

So one reason God says we should submit to the authorities is that they are appointed by him and generally they are against bad behavior and for good behavior. Then Lenski quotes Martin Luther, who had a lot of common sense, and yet dealt with the realistic world. Luther has often said, "It is God's way to hold the world, which is full of bad fellows, in check by means of bad fellows as rulers." He has no foolish idealism about Watergate [a political scandal in America] or about other things like that, but he points out that just as God used Pharaoh, God uses government and often bad fellows in government.

It's interesting that even in communist or heathen lands on the whole, the rulers are against bad conduct and for good conduct. The simple truth is that when God instituted civil authority in Noah's time after the flood, he also put into most men and women common grace -- the common grace that enabled them to realize that if people are allowed to murder and lie and steal without restraint, they'll eventually murder and lie and steal from me, so most rulers grasp that. Most rulers grasp that if you let selfishness go unrestrained, it will eventually find its way to my door and so even the Soviet government sees that if they don't restrain drunkenness, their mighty production machine is going to be hurt by it. So even in Soviet Russia the rulers are, on the whole, on the side of the good conduct and, on the whole, against bad conduct.

Now you may say, "Why, then, is Siberia full of Christians who have been condemned to labor camps because of their Christian faith?" Well loved ones, it's easy to see because the Bible says, "For

rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad." It says good conduct. It doesn't say godly conduct.

"Rulers are a terror not to good conduct but to bad." But it doesn't say, "not to godly conduct, but to ungodly conduct." In other words, God is not suggesting here that the governments and the civil authorities actually promote godliness, nor is he suggesting that they punish ungodliness; he is really saying that actually isn't their business.

The job of civil and legal authorities is, as it says in so many statements, "To protect people from destroying each other's property and estate." In other words, it maintains civil order. It's to encourage good behavior, as far as our own property, our persons and our estates are concerned. It isn't there to make citizens holy. That's the privilege of the church. It's the privilege of the body of Jesus to make people holy. It's the responsibility of the government to keep people's badness from destroying other people.

In other words, civil authorities through the power of law can restrain selfishness, and that's what they're there for, but only the body of Christ through the power of the Spirit, can replace selfishness with godliness. You see, I think we mix those things up. I think especially in a land like America, where Christians and godly people, or church people, have so much influence, it's very easy for us to miss the point that the government is not there to make us godly. We may wish that it was, but that isn't God's plan. The civil government is there simply to stop us murdering each other and to stop us destroying each other; to give us time here on earth to receive Jesus Spirit, if we want.

Now you may say, "Why has God arranged it that way?" The answer is in a verse we looked up before, it's Galatians 3:23. (I'd like to try to have a little question time loved ones, if possible at the end so maybe you will keep your questions in your mind.)

Galatians 3:23, "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed." That's why God has arranged it that way. The purpose of law, of civil law, of the Mosaic Law, is to keep us under restraint from destroying each other until we enter into faith.

You remember a few verses up it's very plain why the government cannot make Christians; it's Galatians 3:21, "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law."

If you could make people like God by laws, then the government could be held responsible for defending godliness, but loved ones, laws don't make a person like Christ and this is the arrangement that God has. You remember Jesus talked about it. He said, "The wheat and the tares grow together, that's my Father's plan. The wheat and the tares grow together and it is the job of government to make it possible for wheat and tares to grow together, and as the wheat and tares grow together, so the wheat grows stronger and blossoms or it is choked by the tares, but that is the Father's plan."

In other words, his plan is that governments would hold back the world from chaos, but would still allow sufficient signs of the fallen state of mankind to exist in society so that people would realize things are not as they should be. And that, Jesus has taught us, is the most fruitful, prosperous climate in which people can grow up into Christ.

In other words, that's a more fruitful way for people to exercise their free wills to choose God than if they were placed, this is amazing, than if in their fallen state, they were placed into their perfect world or a religious ghetto. That kind of hot-house environment would not, in the present state of fallen mankind, be the best climate in which we could grow up into Jesus. So actually God has arranged that governments will probably not do things perfectly and will not produce a Christian state. They will simply hold back evil from destroying us while the body of Jesus, through the Spirit, can woo us to himself.

Now let me push you a little, on some possible conclusions. I don't expect you to agree with me, but I share them with you anyway. Is there any truth in what I am going to say now? Even though the abolition of prayer in schools is based on a silly misinterpretation of the first amendment -- misunderstanding "freedom of religion" for "freedom from religion" -- even though the whole basis of it is stupid and the first amendment actually opposes the establishment of any one religion, (which is presumably an objection to the position that the Anglican Church perhaps held or the Lutheran Church held in the old countries) yet it defends free exercise of religion. So even though the abolition of prayer in schools is based on a stupid misconception and misinterpretation of the first amendment, yet I wonder is it nearer the spirit of what we're reading in this verse than if we had, say, compulsory prayer in schools? I would share with you as an ex-school teacher, that it's very difficult in school when dealing with children to have prayer for everybody without making it compulsory. It's very difficult to lead a class in prayer unless they all understand that we have to have prayer today.

So I wonder, is no prayer at all in schools better than the formal forced prayers that so many of us endured in the schools. And I wonder is the freedom intended to be for a child to say its own individual prayers when it sits down at its desk in class? Is that more in keeping with the real world of work in which most of us spend our lives, and I wonder, in that sense, is it a better preparation for that kind of life?

In other words, when you begin to cease to expect love from the government and look to Jesus and his body for that, and you begin to expect from the government simply justice; when you cease to expect the promotion of godliness from the government and begin to be satisfied with just the restraint of evil, could it be that you find yourself in a more biblical position? Because, you remember, this verse goes on that, "Rulers are a terror not to good conduct, but to bad." So if you want to be free from fear of the governing authorities -- then do what is good and you will receive their approval.

That kind of forbearance towards the authorities seems more in keeping with that scripture. It's certainly more in keeping with that famous scripture, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance", and then, that great phrase, "against such, there is no law." They can't make a law against that. If you live your life filled with that fruit, you'll be well on the right side of any law.

Now, how would it work out in detail? Well, regarding prayer in schools -- is there anything to be said for leaving it abolished, and for developing a strong Sunday school education system that will deal with issues like evolution through the very accomplished and able teachers that we have in our body? That will deal with issues like evolution against creation, and deal with issues like the history of mankind and the development of a church and the benefits it's brought to society and will also deal with the responsibilities of personal prayer and witnessing, and will prepare the children to go into what is a "wheat and tares" situation in our school system and enable them to speak up

for what is true and right? Is there anything to be said for that as opposed to trying to protect them from evil influences -- which it gets very hard to do after a certain age, I think you will agree. Is there anything to be said for that?

Why I say that is, I think I taught for maybe three or four years in the British school system in Ireland and in London, England. Do you know the one subject that is compulsory by the Education Act that was passed in the U.K. in the 1940s? Not math, not science, not English. The one subject that is compulsory is Divinity, or, Religious Education -- that's right. Even in the State schools, that's the one compulsory subject.

I was in one school where I taught half a week of English literature, and about half a week of religious education in a State school. As you can guess, on Graduation Day, we had the ordinary graduation -- and then we canonized saints! Well, you know, we didn't! It was just as if they hadn't had religious education, because it was a compulsory thing and it was often done from hearts that were not filled with love of Jesus.

So is there anything to be said for what I am sharing, then, loved ones, in regard to something like the issue of abortion? Is there anything to be said for concentrating on evangelism, which alone produces hearts that produce pure lives that produce godly children, and at the same time to concentrate on taking our Christian responsibility for unwanted children in adopting them and making sure they come into good homes? Is there anything to be said for that whole positive attitude? Instead of what so often appears as a negative attitude of trying to secure, by law, the submission of certain people to our beliefs about the unborn? Is there anything to be said for that?

You can see some of the benefits of such a forbearing attitude to civil authorities. For one thing, that lets us get on with our business, which is to save souls and to make people like Jesus and to get them filled with the fruit of Spirit, "against which there is no law." For another thing, it delivers us from these coercive efforts that we get involved in -- like mass marches, mass demonstrations, massive lobbying efforts, that actually contain in them the seeds of the destruction of democracy, because they are actually an attempt to coerce men and women's wills.

For another thing such forbearance with the civil authorities allows us to fulfill our obligations to the political system by exercising our vote freely, by taking part in local politics, taking part in PTA meetings, taking part in all the local organization of government, and certainly in writing to our congressmen and telling them what we want them to do, and then in running for office ourselves as God guides us. Such a forbearing attitude to the government enables us to do those things.

In other words, should we not be concentrating on building the kingdom of God in men's hearts, instead of trying to Christianize the kingdom of this world? Certainly, we will appear more like Jesus if we do that, because he was in no doubt. He said, "You render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and you render to God, the things that are God's and you don't spend your time trying to Christianize Caesar. You spend your time trying to save from this untoward generation, those who are willing to submit to my Father's will." Now, is there anything to it that you would like to push me on?

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: Gandhi is being made out to be such a great and honorable fellow and you might even use the

term, "saintly fellow." It seems to me, loved ones, that one of the great dangers of our society is that we pick up label names and we run with them. We're all against abortion. We're all for prayer in schools and we mistake label names and immortal phrases and we substitute them for real thought and reflection. So Richard Attenborough produces the film "Gandhi", it shows through all the theaters, and so we all rush to judgment without reading anything about Gandhi. We accept the movie as the interpretation of Gandhi. And of course many of us would feel that Gandhi was a dear man, but he was not in any way a Christian, and he was very definite about that attitude.

I think I was at school when Gandhi was negotiating with the British government and undoubtedly, he was a dear man but he was a man who had been brought up in the atmosphere of Cambridge, Oxford. He had been exposed, very fully, to all the truths about Jesus, and he had decided "thus far and no further; I will remain a Hindu and I am dedicated primarily to the independence of my country, and to the unity of the Hindus and Muslims in the country." That's fair enough.

But in no way would we have ever thought of him as a Christian, or as standing up for Jesus in any way. He was certainly very willing to quote Jesus as far as turning the other cheek, when the whole technique of mass demonstration and civil disobedience was necessary, but he used that part of the Christian philosophy because that was about the most powerful way he could deal with what-- because there are loved ones from India here -- what I would respectfully suggest to you, was made possible because you were dealing with a fairly sane, fairly civilized government and not dealing with a Soviet Russia, who would have just mowed us down like tin soldiers. I think this thought made it that simple.

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: The comment is that what I just said is important and yet that it takes an American to say, because a Britisher seems to have a personal interest. But that it is questionable if India was ready at that time for it. And you only have to look at the continued slaughter of the Muslims and Hindus to wonder if that was God's time or not. I would respect any loved one from India who would say, "Oh well, you Britishers -- you would never have let go." Well, who knows, but it certainly does seem that it brought great pain in the end.

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: Loved ones, if your theory is bad, your practice is bad. If your doctrine is bad, the outworking is bad. So if by any chance our doctrine or our theory on issues like prayer in schools and abortion -- if by any chance that's bad and wrong, then there will be the same trend of evil consequences, as a result of that. So it is very important that we know what we believe about these things and what we should do. Otherwise we can very easily end up with a polarized society; with the "good Christians" over here and the "bad, evil, non-Christians" over there, and that has never been Jesus' way.

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: I tried to deal with it a little over the past few Sundays, because I pointed out that Paul was undoubtedly writing this in the midst of the rule of Nero. Now admittedly, Nero, the Roman Emperor, was at that time running his five years or so of quiet, peaceful government. But undoubtedly, Paul had seen the execution of Jesus by a combination of the Jewish authorities and the

Roman authorities.

Paul himself had been involved in some of the persecution of the Christians and so he undoubtedly was writing in a similar situation to what many of us endured in the Second World War, and it does seem to me that he is saying you submit, presumably, unless you are in a position where you can do something about it. What I suggest it was, that in the 1930's as Hitler rose to power, there was a time for especially the knowledgeable middle classes, to vote and vote with their conscience. And it seems that if we don't exercise our responsibility at the right time then we end up in situations that, as you say, are utterly unjust and so God is requiring us to submit in situations that aren't ideal at all but it does seem he still wants us to submit.

One cannot say that Dietrich Bonhoeffer [Christian theologian who plotted to kill Hitler] is proved one way or the other. It certainly didn't work and yet you feel for Bonhoeffer. But it seems questionable if we should ever engage in doing evil to do good.

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: I understand and I would like to make it very clear, I am not arguing for abortion. I am arguing for our responsibility to preserve the free will of loved ones who don't think like us. It seems to be very important to maintain that.

I think that if we will respect people's free will, as God has done even at the cost of his own Son's death, then it seems to me, we can expect God to overrule even some of the dreadful consequences that will follow. It seems very important not to get ourselves into the position of God where we say, "No, we have to keep this little one alive at all costs, whether you, as the mother, want to or not. We have to do it so that this little one will have a chance to come to God."

It seems to me in the process, in a very embittered, resentful woman, you might actually drive one away from the kingdom, even as you were trying to win a chance for the other to enter the kingdom. So I am not against opposing abortion, but I'm wondering, should you do it in such a way that you appear as a domineering, self-righteous church, trying to run the lives of other people, that's what I question.

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: The position of so many of us is that we should not support, by tax dollars, a policy that makes abortion possible. And I urge us, loved ones, to see that there are many of our fellow human beings in this nation that do not think the same way as we do about abortion, and they have a right to influence the policy of government also. What I am pleading is that we allow that policy to be set by the normal system of voting and that we go very close to coercion of will when we get into intense lobbying.

It seems to me that many of us in recent years have been troubled by the power of the special interest groups. It seems often to oppose the very basis of democracy, which is "every man one vote", and then the result of that decision is what governs our society. And it seems to me that we, as a Christian body, have to be in the forefront of defending what Churchill said was a dreadful system of government but it was the only one worth having, democracy. And it seems we have to be in the forefront of defending that and well away from any of the methods that seem to undermine the individual vote.

So brother, I think I agree with you, probably, on the whole theory of the abortion and infanticide -- or certainly I won't disagree with you -- but I wonder given that, have you the right then, to play God over other people, or to use methods that may not be democratic in the best sense of the word, to bring that about? Now maybe we have, maybe. And people could argue, "The special interest group is here to stay. The power of the mass demonstration is here to stay." I would only say to all of us that we receive Jesus because we have the free will to reject him if we want and most of us who were coerced into religion in our early years found we rebelled strongly against it. So that's what I wonder about, are we really being as clever as Jesus is, who gave us this great freedom to choose or reject? And I wonder are we getting ourselves into the position where we coerce?

Question from audience: (Inaudible)

Answer: Brother is saying, "Have I not responsibility to try to stop a person aborting a life -- that is doing something wrong?"

I think you have a responsibility to try to stop them, but it seems to me brother, by the only way that Jesus has tried to stop us: by his love -- by his own attitude of self sacrifice. That's why I urge things like that Golden Crib organization in Philadelphia where there's real concern for the adoption of unwanted babies -- provision of help for them rather than coming over as just a negative thing.

It seems to me brother, all of us whether we're school teachers, parents or pastors, all of us are sure, there's only one way to stop a person doing evil and that's a wooing, you know, wooing them to the good, and it's, we're all like little dogs. If you want us to do something, tell us not to do it. There is something in human nature that is perverse and until it is changed, a person will tend to go the opposite way to the way you tell him. So, I suspect brother that is even poor psychology, apart from what seems to me, bad theology, but it could be, it could be, watch yourself.

I think we should close, loved ones.

Dear Father, we thank you for your love for us and the love that you have begotten in our hearts for each other, so that we are able to love each other, even if we disagree. Lord, we thank you for that. Thank you that that's because we know you are the great overruling power, and that we may misunderstand things utterly, and yet if our hearts are right towards you, you will do what you promised. You will work all things out according to the counsel of your will.

So, we thank you Lord that we have a responsibility to be real and analytical in our pursuit of truth, but we thank you Father, that when we get to the end of this life we will be amazed how you have blessed us when we have understood so little because now we "see through a glass darkly, but then face-to-face."

So Father, we thank you for this deeper way that you have brought to us, a unity of spirit, not necessarily a unity of mind on everything, but a unity of spirit that derives its strength from the fact that you are the God, not us. And you will take even our mistakes and work them into your plan, if our hearts are right and our intentions are good.

So Lord, we thank you for that. We pray therefore that through the Holy Spirit, you will guide us individually and guide us as a body in these areas that we have been discussing, and above all, that

you'll enable us to mirror you, Lord Jesus, to the world. That when the world looks at us, they will see a group of people who have a smile and a kindness in their hearts, and who have such trust in their God that they themselves do not need to be gods.

Oh Lord, make us like Jesus so that others may be drawn by his beauty to your own heart. Now, 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.