Romans 13:1-7 Sermon Manuscript

“Living Sacrifices as a Citizen”

I am thankful for my government. I am thankful for the existence of government. I am thankful we have law and order in this country for the most part compared to other countries. When I look at what other countries lack, I am grateful that as imperfect as our government is, we at least have a government. One country that I looked at that made me feel grateful for living here in America was Mexico. Specifically Neuvo Laredo, Mexico back in July of 2005. That year was a year in which the government of the city of Neuvo Laredo was in shambles. It was a city taken over by gangs, there were virtually no city police, and the little police that were there were often corrupt and working in collaboration with the gangs. It was a bloody city where people would be murdered by gang members in broad daylight in front of women and children. In June of 2005, knowing the need for police, there was a brave citizen named Alejandro Dominguez who decided to stand up for justice and swear an oath to become chief of police of that city. However just hours after he swore that oath, he was sadly assassinated. That terrible time for that city is what it looks like when there is no government authority or control.

I mention government or the lack thereof because today’s Scripture passage is about government, and how we are to view the government and live in light of its authority as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. Now the switch to government in the book of Romans is not random or out of nowhere, but connected to what we have been studying so far in the letter. Romans 12:2 commands us to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The very fact that the Apostle Paul says that we are not to be conformed to THIS WORLD sets the church on a collision course with this secular world, and in particular with its governments. Another reason Paul brings up government is because back in Romans chapter 8 verse 34, he says that Christ was raised and is at the right hand of God (which is a declaration of Christ’s sovereignty and kingship and lordship over all earthly powers). Also mind you that Romans is written to a people in Rome living during the time of the emperor Nero who shortly, in a couple of years would start persecuting Christians and in a twisted sense of humor would burn them at the stake, using them as torch lights for his parties.

So the natural question for a believer living during that time is how are Christians to live as living sacrifices in the world, when it comes to obeying a government like the Roman government where the emperor claims that he is “god” and that his rule is absolute? Should a Christian even obey the government at all? Romans has told us to be people who live in light of God’s many mercies to us, but how does that look when the government you are under is oppressive and evil? Paul is going to address those questions in this passage. And specifically, I want to give you three reasons why you need to obey government. The first is to obey the government because government is instituted by God (vv. 1-2). The second reason is that obeying the government prevents punishment for evil (vv. 3-4). Thirdly and finally we obey the government so that we would have a greater testimony for Christ (vv. 5-7).

So let’s look at the first reason why we need to obey government that to obey the government is to obey God. Starting in chapter 13 verse 1 “*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist have been appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists that authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves*.” This would have been a shocking statement for the Roman Christians to hear. Rome was not seen as a just and gracious government. They taxed their people highly and were often ruthless and brutal in their administration and punishments. Yet, the Word of God says the Roman government, Caesar himself was raised to power because God appointed him to that power. Therefore, quite simply to resist Caesar, to resist the Roman government and all its laws is to resist and rebel against God Himself. Jesus said, “render to Caesar the things of Caesar and to God what is of God.” Whether it’s a good government or an evil government, Paul includes all governments! That includes even Nazi Germany, as horrible as that sounds, or atheistic communist governments. And notice also Paul says, “governing authorities” (plural)…So it’s not just we have to obey at the federal level for here in the US, but also the State level, down to the local laws and governors that governs us.

No matter how noble our cause may be, if we resist authority and “draw the sword” so to speak against the government, we will receive condemnation upon ourselves, meaning not eternal condemnation for our souls, but condemnation in a temporal sense, possibly leading to the penalty of death. Jesus illustrated this on the night he was betrayed and arrested. If you remember Peter took a sword with him and when he saw the Roman garrison come to arrest Jesus, he drew his sword and went to lop off the head of one of Romans. He ended up slicing the ear off of Malchus, a slave. But Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “put the sword away Peter for he who lives by the sword will die by the sword.” In other words, Jesus was warning Peter that if he lives his life resisting authority with a sword, he shouldn’t be surprised if he sentenced to death by the sword as punishment by the Roman government.

So we need to recognize that government is established by God Himself to act as the authoritative arm of justice and order in society and to resist our government is to resist God. But the second reason we need to obey government is so that we don’t receive the penalty and consequences from the government for doing evil in society. Verses 3 and 4: “*For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of that authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword in vain, for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil*.”

God has given government the delegated authority and power of the sword (or today it would be the power of the “gun”) to punish evildoers and lawbreakers and to some extent reward those who do good in society. The “sword” of the government is a restraint on evil. Now someone like Caesar or any governmental ruler who reads the book of Romans up to this point would have seen verses 1 and 2 speaking about how rulers are established by God to act on his behalf and said “yeah, that’s right Paul, to resist me is to resist God, haha!” However, when those rulers read verses 3 and 4, where it says “*for rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil*” that will make them pause, if they are indeed a ruthless dictator or evil ruler, because God is clearly defining how rulers are to rule! Rulers are not to be oppressive, brutal, and call good evil and evil good. They are not to persecute and put to death people who are peaceful like Christians. God pronounced many woes against Israel’s kings for their unjust treatment of the people. Rulers and kings are put in their position by God to punish those who are morally evil, not those who are morally good. Paul is not describing what all current rulers are, but what they OUGHT to be as ministers of God. It’s amazing that God considers them His “ministers,” his “servants,” even those who are not considered a good and just ruler. Whether a government official realizes it or not, from the tax person down to the president, they are acting as ministers, or servants of God to do us good.

One thing people do know, or at least used to know a lot more was that if you take a life, then you lose your life. The principle of capital punishment was established back in Genesis 9:6 where God said, “*Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man*.” But today when someone murders someone or even murders multiple people, they instead get a life sentence, not the death sentence. Now our tax payer dollars will have to go feeding this man for the rest of his life and providing for his shelter and living. It’s expensive to support a lifer. He will be able to hang out with his prison buddies and enjoys a lot of the privileges that a person who does not care about people’s lives should not have. When the government gives a life sentence when it should have been a death sentence, you know what that doesn’t do to criminals or would be criminals? It doesn’t scare them. It doesn’t send them a fearful enough message to stop their crime. It’s not enough of a deterrent to stop them from committing horrible crimes. Ecclesiastes 8:11 speaks to this when it says this: “*Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil*.” I believe government should have capital punishment because life is so precious in the sight of God that if anyone dares to take someone else’ life, his life will be taken as well.

Can you imagine if we lived in a lawless society where everyone did what was right in their own eyes? Can you imagine if there is no order, no government, but just plain anarchy? You know for many people in this country, the only thing holding people back from raping, stealing, and murdering others is the fear of governmental consequences and punishment. James Madison the fourth president of the United States said “*If men were angels, no government would be necessary*.” Men’s hearts are so bent towards evil, they need an outside restraint to keep it in check. It’s sad, but it’s the truth. So we should obey the government, knowing and recognizing that it is established by God Himself and that we should obey it and do good as a citizen, following the laws of whatever country you are living in because if you don’t there are consequences. However, thirdly and lastly we should obey the government because we will have a greater testimony for Christ, verses 5 through 7. Verse 5 “T*herefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of that wrath, but also because of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 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*.” We need to be in subjection, to submit, to the government not only because of wrath, or the power of the sword, but because of conscience, so that we would have a clean conscience…so that when we stand before kings and governors for the sake of Christ, our conscience isn’t accusing or condemning us that we are on trial because we have sinned against men by breaking a law.

In Acts 23, Paul was standing trial before the Sanhedrin, you can say the Jewish government and he started off saying this “*Brothers, I have lived my life in all good conscience before God up to this day*.” In Acts 24 when Paul was standing trial before Felix the governor he said this in his testimony “*In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a conscience without fault both before God and before men*.” Paul could honestly with a pure mind and conscience say to all the Roman rulers he had to stand trial before that he didn’t do anything wrong or sinful or lawbreaking or anything worthy of death. He even was bold enough to verbalize and affirm the Roman death penalty if he did do something wrong. Acts 25:11 when Paul was standing trial before Festus, he said “*If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse men, no one can hand me over to them*.*”*  Do you see how important keeping a clean conscience is when it comes to our testimony before the government? Paul wouldn’t have been an effective witness for Jesus Christ if he was guilty of breaking the Law, stealing and hurting people, and uttering threats, and neither would we if we did the same. There was only one time recorded in the book of Acts where you could say Paul “sinned” while standing trial…it was that passage I quoted to you when he was before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23. The high priest Ananias ordered those standing next to Paul to strike Paul on the mouth and Paul retaliated back with words saying, “*God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall*!” But Paul said that, not knowing that that person that ordered him to be struck was the high priest. And Paul remembered the Scripture passage in Exodus 22:28 that “*one should not speak ill or evil of a ruler*.” But Paul acknowledged his sin and repented of that. But all other points recorded for us in Acts, Paul had a blameless conscience.

And with that type of conscience, a major way we demonstrate our obedience and submission to the government is paying taxes, yay!! Isn’t that interesting? Out of all things God could have said, He said to pay taxes. I was reading a commentary on this very verse which and the commentary began with the words “*No one enjoys paying taxes…but taxes are a part of everyday life*.” The IRS is not exactly the first people you think of as “fun people” to be around. If we think taxation is bad here, we would have fallen over backwards at how expensive the Jewish tax was as well as how much the Romans taxed its citizens. I know, paying taxes is a thorn in the side of most everyone, I don’t enjoy it either. I enjoy getting my tax returns though! When I see how much is taken away from my paycheck, a tear rolls downs my cheek. Especially it’s difficult to accept because knowing that your tax money is probably not being used in the best possible way to help people who are in actual need…or to know that your money might be used for corruption or support planned parenthood, abortion, and other practices that go against your convictions.

But the command from God is simple, we must pay our taxes. That is the least that we can do as those who are offering up their lives as living sacrifices to God and being obedient, law abiding citizens of the United States of America. But God is choosing to address the topic of taxes and commanding us to pay our taxes because we are prone not to in our sinful flesh! In 2022, the IRS estimated that about 606 billions dollars were missing in taxes that we owed to the government. 606 Billion!!! You know when I was in Los Angeles, there was a taco truck around every street corner in LA. I noticed throughout the years that almost every single one of the ones that I went to get tacos from only took cash, and no debit or credit card. I was also like “no, not another one with cash…I don’t carry cash with me.” But then I struck me years later that a lot of these latinos who ran these taco truck businesses were illegals and they didn’t want to pay taxes and that’s why they took cash only, because cash is untraceable and you can lie on your tax returns and the IRS won’t ever know.

Hear me out, I’m not saying ALL those taco truck people lied on their tax returns…I’m sure there were taco truck owners who properly reported their cash earnings on their tax return and had other reasons for taking cash only. Now, this is a little bit of a controversial statement and I don’t mean to intentionally step on anyone’s toes with this, but I think based on what the Bible says in Romans 13, and I love my country, that the American Revolution and how our country was born was sinful. One of the main reasons the Americans revolted against the British was because of the high taxation and they took up arms and started a war! The British weren’t preventing the Americans from worshipping the Lord or making them sin and even if they were, that is not a reason for us to take up the sword or in this case the “gun” and retaliate in the name of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as much as we cherish those values. Now God used the agency of sinful men to bring about this country’s existence and he blessed us tremendously despite the founding fathers’ sin and rebellion against the British government. And I’m sure our country would look quite different than what it is today if they didn’t rebel, but then again we don’t know how God would have shaped the future of our country. And here we are hundred of years later and we are what we are.

But the point is, no matter how foolish or unreasonable or extreme we think the laws of the government are, as long as they don’t make us sin by either preventing us from worshipping the Lord or making us do something sinful, then we pay taxes to whom taxes are due, honor to whom honor, fear to whom fear. And if the government does force us to not evangelize or not gather together as a church to worship corporately like the Covid mandates in a couple of years ago or forces us to do something perverse, then the government has stepped outside of God’s boundary and design for government to reward good and punish evil and we are to obey God rather than men. An example for us in the Bible of what it looks like to disobey as a Christian is found in Acts 5:27-32 “*And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Sanhedrin. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly commanded you not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered and said, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging Him on a tree. This One God exalted to His right hand as a Leader and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God gave to those who obey Him*.” The disciples did not use filthy words, they did not draw their swords, but respectfully responded back in disobedience to the Sanhedrin because the Sanhedrin was forcing the disciples to disobey Christ’s command to proclaim the gospel to all the world. And WE don’t draw our swords because Jesus said to Pilate in John 18:36 “*Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be delivered over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not from here.”*

At the same time, when we are wronged by the government or persecuted by the government, it doesn’t mean we can’t use our lawful rights as a citizen or use whatever legal recourse may be available to us to contest a law or policy. Paul used his rights as a Roman citizen to his advantage where he appealed to Caesar. In Acts 22 as Paul was being stretched out to be tortured by flogging, Paul said to the Roman centurion standing by him “*is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman and uncondemned*?...and because he showed was a Roman citizen they let him go. But the ultimate example that we find in Scripture of being a living sacrifice to God as a citizen of earth is Jesus Christ. In Matthew 17 some Jewish tax collectors came to Peter asking “*Does your* *teacher not pay the two-drachma tax? Peter replied “yes.” And then Jesus asked Peter this… “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect tolls or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?” And when Peter said, “From strangers,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are exempt. However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take that and give it to them for Me and you.”*

The Son of God did not need to pay the temple tax, He’s the Son of God! He is the temple itself! However, so that Jesus would be a perfect testimony of being a law abiding citizen on earth, and to give us an example to follow, he paid the temple tax anyway. And that’s the attitude we need to have when it comes to submitting to the government. We need to look to Jesus who had every right to refuse paying taxes, who had every right to refuse arrest, and who had every right to refuse being crucified, and yet He willingly suffered for us went to the cross to His death, submitting to the Roman government, as unlawful as it was. But because of that, because Jesus who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, many came to saving faith like the centurion standing there at the cross coming to the realization that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the Lamb that had come to be slain for sinners. I just want to close with this quote from John Piper because he summarized better than I can what kind of people we should be: “*We are people of the cross. Our Lord submitted to crucifixion willingly to save his enemies. We owe our eternal life to him. We are forgiven sinners. This takes the swagger out of our protest. It takes the arrogance out of our resistance. And if, after every other means has failed, we must disobey for the sake of love and justice, we will first remove the log from our own eye, which will cause enough pain and tears to soften our indignation into a humble, quiet, but unshakeable, NO. The greatest battle we face is not overcoming unjust laws, but becoming this kind of people*.” So let us become this kind of people through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let’s pray