

**For the Sake of Conscience: How the Gospel Prompts Us to Relate to Government (from the Series “*Longing for Change*”)**

**Romans 13:1-7**

**Teaching Elder, Dr. Gene Cornett**

**Sunday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

**Dr. Gene Cornett, Teaching Elder:**

Let's pray. Jesus, we worship you because you lived the life that we ought to have lived, and you died the death that we deserve to die, and you rose from the dead, proving that you are who you say you are. And we rejoice in the reality of the good news that when we embrace that as our only hope, your work there, and trust in you that you make us whole on the inside and cause us to go from spiritual death to spiritual life. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

This text that we're about to read, you can't just pick it up and read it like it was written yesterday. The believers that this text was written to were living in a system nothing like the one that you live in politically. They had no power whatsoever. They had no voice. They had no means of influencing anything. There was no such thing as a Christian leader anywhere. And, so, when we approach a text like this, we have to approach carefully, and not just pick it up and immediately apply it to circumstances that we face now, as we're in danger of misunderstanding it when we do it that way. So, we need to listen well to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us, and we need to think in community, to do this together, and to listen to believers from both now and in time past to grasp what this text means, to help us to answer this question: is our response to authorities in our lives a knee-jerk reaction or is it a thought-out, God-honoring strategy? We're called to follow authorities in our life because of and for the sake of the Gospel, up until they ask us to disobey, and then we respectfully resist.

First off, there's in this text there's God's role, there's the government's role, and there's your role. First of all, we trust God's role in the process of placing authority. Verses 1 and 2: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God and those who've been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement.”

Now, if you're following along, reading in Romans, this is not a brand-new subject with no relevance with what's gone before. This is part of the implications of what it means to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. It's not a new topic; it's what the Gospel is prompting us toward. So, Paul says: “Let *every* person be subject...” *Every* person. *Everyone*. One of the implications of that is that the leaders also—every person alive needs to be in subjection to someone. There needs to be an accountability process. No one is safe without some sort of accountability in our life. And the very nature of what authority is, *all* comes from God, and the authorities in our life—generally any leadership, any authority in our life—is meant to be for our good and to provide stability in the world around us, so that we can faithfully follow God. So, when we resist generally leadership in our life... Now, if you, there's questions arising in your mind even as I'm saying this—we're getting there; I'm going to get to the questions you're having in your mind. But when we resist generally leadership in our life but specifically

government authorities, we are resisting God; we're resisting what God has done for our good, and there will be consequences to that, whether it's a speeding ticket or something worse.

So, I had the privilege of teaching Sparks in AWANA this week—that's our youngest elementary-age kids. And I did a version of this sermon with our elementary kids. And so, maybe you're thinking now: *so maybe not so much Gene needs to be teaching the younger kids in AWANA*. So, here's what I did: I said, *I want you to tell me about your favorite game*. And, so they, they threw some out, but the general consensus was hide-and-seek. So, I asked them: *so, talk to me about what are the rules of hide-and-seek?* And they told me some of those rules, and I said: *what happens if people don't follow the rules?* And so, they said: *well, that's no good; I mean, that's no fun. It just doesn't work if no one follows the rules*. And so, you know, I'm kind of leading them along here, so I said: *so, what you're telling me is rules are good!* Rules are good. And I got them to say that out loud with me: *rules are good*. Nobody seemed to resist that a whole lot. Rules are good. And structure is good. And I said: *furthermore, leaders in your life—whether it's a parent, or a coach, or a teacher—they*, well actually what I did now I'm forgetting I said: *let's imagine you have a much younger sibling and that you're responsible for just a couple minutes to watch your younger sibling, and you know, you may not go over the rules, but there's some things you're trying to do. You don't want them to play in the street. You don't want them to put stuff that's not good for them in their mouth to try to eat that. You don't want them, to touch a hot stove*. And I said: *when you're doing that you're trying to protect them*. And I said: *the instructions from God that we have are like that. They're trying to protect you. And the leaders in your life are there for your good, they're there for your protection*. Now, I went on to say to them, and they understood that it would be possible for a leader to actually ask you to do something that was wrong, and we processed that and how we ought to handle that, but they, but it's an understanding at that level of what this text is about.

Leadership structures, and leaders themselves, and specifically government leaders are placed in our lives for our good, and so God's call on our life is to be obedient to them. It doesn't mean that they're always right, but the stability and structure they provide are God's good gifts to us. Now, there are many things that are happening in our government right now from all sides that break my heart and make me crazy at times, but an interesting thought experiment would be: what if, what if it all went away? What if the military stood down right now? What if the leaders went home, and the police didn't offer any police effort in our society? The result would be complete anarchy, and chaos, and tragedy for everyone. So, God's people need to be those who even if they wildly disagree with some of the government structures that are going on, that we still express gratitude to God for the structures that are around us because we recognize that it is there for our good. God's people need to be those who appreciate leadership and not those who just sit back and play armchair quarterback as if they are all-wise knowing what the leaders around them ought to be doing. Or, like Paul says in I Timothy 2:1-4: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions..." And here's the goal, listen to this. He says: "...that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life."

Paul's overarching concern... Remember the people living in Rome that he's writing to—they lived in a dramatically different circumstance than the one you're living in. But he was concerned—he didn't want them disobeying in some way that would draw undue attention to

[themselves]. His concern was that they be free to operate as a church, to be free to operate to share the Gospel with people, and if they disobeyed on some manner, some matter that was not an ultimate Gospel issue where, or they were being ordered to disobey something God had specifically said to do, that they were to be cooperative. He says we are to be “godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” That’s the highest goal. That’s the greatest concern that Paul’s concerned about for them and for us—that we’re to operate in a way that it creates the environment as much as it lies with us to get the best news ever to the most people possible. And Paul is saying that our cooperation with leadership is part of that. We’re to trust God’s role for these things.

But what do we do, then when those government leaders or leaders around us are not faithfully carrying out God’s intent? Secondly, then, we have a responsibility to monitor the government’s role in carrying out God’s intent. Look at verses 3-4. It says: “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

So, throughout this text, Paul is addressing the divine ideal—when leadership structures are doing what is good and right. But let me tell you what this text does *not* mean. It does not mean that a ruler or a leader of any sort can demand that those under their care or their subjects do whatever he or she wants no matter what. It does not mean that a boss can order you to break the law in some manner, or that a coach should order you to cheat. I had coaches in my life that tried to get me to do that, that tried to teach us techniques for cheating. This passage has often been misused by totalitarian leaders who said: *look what this text says right here. You’re supposed to be subject to me and do what I say in an unquestioning manner.* And that is an abuse of this text. That is not what it is there for.

But we got to remember who Paul is writing to. Any resistance whatsoever to the leadership structure they were in, where they were absolutely powerless, would likely bring trouble. And so, they were to reserve any resistance to leadership to a direct challenge where they’re being ordered to do something God says not to do, or they’re being ordered not to do something that God says to do. And other than that, they were to be cooperative. And so that’s why Paul can say: so, if you want to have no fear of the one who is in authority... He’s obviously talking about one who is doing the right thing, then do what is good and you will receive his approval. One of the things that this implies is that everybody understands that government entities have a responsibility to restrain evil, but one implication of this text is that they have a responsibility to encourage the good, but that would be another talk for another time that we can’t really get into completely. But no leader gets to hold this up and say: *you have to do what I want.* And, you know, the injustice that happens[inaudible]. Remember the person who’s writing this knows very well the injustice that happened in Jesus’ arrest, and trial, and crucifixion. And, though at times Paul would actually call on the fact that he was a Roman citizen and would draw some benefit of that, he was also on the business end of negative leadership where he was imprisoned for preaching the Gospel, so he’s not naïve in talking about these things. It’s a very nuanced argument.

There's a lot of examples in scripture of individuals who were doing their best to be faithful in a difficult circumstance but still offered resistance. One incident you may remember is way back in Exodus is when the Hebrew midwives were ordered by Pharaoh to kill the baby boys that were being born to Hebrew women, and they resisted. They did not do what he said, and God protected them in that. But in their resistance, they were taking their own lives in their hands. In the New Testament, Peter and John are arrested—this is recorded in Acts chapter 4. And they're being ordered not to preach, so they say: *look, you'll have to judge whether it's right for us to do what God says or what you say, but we can't help but talk about what we have seen and heard.* But my favorite example is Daniel in the Old Testament—he was abducted from his homeland. He was in a completely powerless situation—abducted and carried off to a foreign land, and in that pagan foreign experience where he had no power whatsoever, he learned to negotiate. He was respectful of leadership. He did excellent work. He actually showed compassion toward the leaders that he was under, but then at times when he was asked to do something that went against what he understood God's commands to him to be, he was able to carefully, very respectfully negotiate a different arrangement in one circumstance. And then in another circumstance his buddies end up getting tossed into a fiery furnace because they won't bow to this big idol. And then in chapter 6's recording, Daniel gets tossed into a lion's den because he's been ordered not to pray, but it's a fantastic example of a person offering their best, doing good work, being respectful to leadership, but then resisting when they must. Trying to understand what this means in our time, where we do have an opportunity to influence, where we do have an opportunity to be involved, means that we have a responsibility to carefully exercise resistance when that needs to be done, but it also points to the reality that we have a responsibility to monitor what the leadership in our lives are doing and help to hold them accountable. And they'll be occasions that we need to say to leaders like Jesus said to Pilate: *you would have no authority over me if it weren't given to you by God.*

So, being informed is your job; it's your responsibility. And, as I've said from this place before, cable news is not the place to get it. They're simply manipulating us to get you to keep watching. It's a money-making operation that's not helping us, and it's not helping you do this. It's going to require some reading; it's going to require some thinking; it's going to require some research. But we do have the opportunity to influence, and we must take it. But one thing that I've done in the last two weeks in studying this passage of scripture—and this opens up a whole can of worms that I'm just going to peek open the can a little bit—and that is, especially this verse here, when it says, uhm, verse 3: “Rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad.” You know, I've got enough friends and talked to enough African American believers, especially men, that when they read that verse, I just knew that they would see and hear different things. And so, I deliberately put myself in front of a couple of African American brothers over the last couple of weeks and said: *just tell me, man, tell me, brother, what do you hear when you read that?* And, we need to understand that we need to hear these passages of scripture carefully and to understand the challenges that different groups of people who would say in reading that: *it's like, man, that has not been my experience at all. That doesn't feel like that's the way it works ever for me.*

And so, that also is part of being aware, being informed, and when we see, and when we sense injustice, that also brings responsibilities to bear for us. So, we're to trust God's role in the

process. We're to monitor the work of government and how they're carrying out God's will. And then, finally, we're to act on our role out of obedience to God.

The last couple verses say: "Therefore, in light of all of this, in light of the mercies of God, one must be in subjection..." One *must be* in subjection. "...not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. So, pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenues to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed."

You are not safe without accountability in your life. No one is. But, in the specific case of relating to government, we're to be obedient. We're to follow the laws. We're to follow the rules. When he says: "...not only to avoid God's wrath..." he's not talking about, in this case, he's not talking about, as I understand it, God's wrath and judgement at the end of time, but he's talking about experiencing the consequences of breaking the law now because the government authorities are God's servants for our good for the stability of society. And so, when we deliberately do what the law says not to do, we're placing ourselves in danger of experiencing that. But then he has this curious comment where he says: "...but also for the sake of conscience." Your conscience is that part of you that can be damaged, but has a sense of what's right and what's wrong. And this is why I keep saying the statement: *no one is safe without accountability*. Everyone needs accountability in their lives because we need people, and structures, and systems in our life to encourage us, to aim us to do what is good for us to do, and what is good for society for us to do. Because when we go against our consciences, the more we do that, the greater the danger is that we kind of overrun our conscience in such a way that we begin to no longer notice the warning that's going off in our soul that says: *this isn't right*. And so, these structures are placed around us as God's good gifts to us for the sake of being able to have a stable society, and to protect us, and to encourage us to do what is right. And then he says this crazy thing: "For because of this, you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing." As sure as five dollars will almost buy you a Venti Pumpkin Spice Latte at Starbucks, your taxes pay for this stable structure, as unstable as you might feel like that it is, just imagine what it would be like if it all went away.

It's interesting, I hadn't planned to say this, but, I took it out my notes, now I'm putting it back in—there are a lot of movies that depict what would happen if evil took over. There's a scene in *It's a Wonderful Life*... I don't have time to get into it. There's the whole movie *Back to the Future [Part] II* is kind of imagining what would happen if evil forces took over. All of the dystopian novels and movies about the future deal with what would happen if good structures around us were taken away. God says: *it is your responsibility before me*.

One of the things that the Gospel is aiming you toward is to, with a greater and a better attitude, is pay your taxes. [Gene laughing]. It's, honestly, I didn't expect this at all. Part of the outcome of studying this passage for me is that I've looked at my financial process personally and I'm convicted that I need to do a better job. Because there's a greater danger of just making mistakes in those things if you don't keep good records, and if you don't do that, that's part of the outcome, that's part of what the Gospel is encouraging us to do here.

But when he says that “you pay taxes to whom taxes [are] owed, revenues to whom revenue [is owed], respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor...,” it’s a version of what Jesus said when Jesus said: “you give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and you give to God what is God’s.” We owe ultimate allegiance and worship to God, and no human system can demand that the way some socialist and some communist systems do, to demand ultimate allegiance.

But I’ve encountered a lot of believers over the sake of my life who just have really negative attitudes about paying their taxes, or just really negative attitudes about leaders in general. It has been, I’ve been leading stuff all my life, and so, perhaps, maybe I’m a little oversensitive to that, but sometimes it seems like that people will say anything to leaders as if they’re made of Teflon. And it has no effect on them whatsoever. Part of the implication of this text seems to me that God’s people would be those who are appreciative of government leaders, and, yes, they hold them accountable, and, yes, they vote because elections have consequences, and that’s important. But there ought to be a level of gratitude and not such a level of negative criticism that just tries to rip people apart and tear people down. It’s the sort of thing that prompted President Theodore Roosevelt once to say, and this is from a very humanistic perspective, but we don’t want to be the kind of people that makes any leader in any system want to say this:

“It’s not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer or deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming.”

We need to act on our role out of obedience to God in the same spirit of whatever it is that we do, we do it as unto the Lord. And instead of begrudging disgust, we recognize that when we pay our taxes, when we carry out our responsibilities, that we’re buying goods and services that are for our good, that are ultimately for the sake of the Gospel, so that we can get the best news ever to the most people possible. And, so, yes, we must engage in whether government ought to be bigger or smaller but our attitude in that ought not be one of just self-focus, but one out of obedience to God.

And, let me say one other thing, and then I’ll wrap this up. One of the things that this passage made me think about is that there’s just an expectation in this culture, and I don’t know if it’s always been the case, but my sense is from somewhere along the 1950s that it is now just understood to be a rite of passage that young people are going to rebel in some manner. They’re going to... It’s like I can remember being in elementary school, the minute—no matter how many warnings—the minute the teacher would go out of the room, we would start misbehaving in some way, usually it was just talking. But, you know, once the accountability wasn’t there, we’re just trying to get away with something. Whether that, once you get a car, whether that gets reflected in speeding and always watching to try to make sure that you’re looking and trying to avoid police, or whether it’s trying to get away with looking at something on the computer that ought not to be looked at, or to cheat on a test.

One of the implications of this passage is that yeah, everything about the culture is kind of encouraging us toward that. So much entertainment and so much encouragement is moving us

toward that. But what this passage says is what the Gospel is prompting us toward even when we are a teenager, if you have surrendered to God, is that you are dying to all of that rebellion, and you are to reserve resistance to a case when a leader is asking you to do something against what God says or they're taking advantage of someone else. We're not to be doormats, but we're not to wear being rebellious and trying to get away with stuff as a badge of honor. That's not what the Gospel is aiming us toward. So, we're to trust God's role in the process of placing authorities in our life. We're to monitor the role of leaders, but specifically governmental leaders and to be informed, and to be involved, and we're to act on our role for the sake of, because of, and for the sake of the Gospel.

Listen, if the believers that Paul were writing to could speak to us this morning, they would be absolutely incredulous to look at us and say: *wait a minute, you have the opportunity to actually influence this system? You have a vote? You can do something about what's going on, and you don't take it?* They would be, they'd be stunned, they'd be shocked by that information. It is our responsibility before God.

So, the vertical relationship with God has to be correct first. We hear the Gospel and allow the good news to motivate us and to move us, but it has numerous implications for a horizontal relationships, and it's so that we may lead a quiet life. And I'll say it for the third time, so we can focus on getting the best news ever to the most people possible. That we might be able to be the difference in the lives of people that we encounter, and that as a church body, we can be about making disciples who make disciples.

But this all goes back to the reality that the biggest leadership issue that all of us face in our lives is: am I going to be the ultimate authority for me, or am I going to surrender to God? That is the ultimate leadership question that everyone faces, because once that's settled, once we surrender to God, because of the mercies of God, and offer our bodies for the first time as living sacrifice. God, I cannot fix myself. I surrender to you. That's the ultimate leadership question that has to be solved. And I wonder, if you've settled *that*, then there will be lots of implications for every other aspect of your life that flow out of that. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that you would help us to think well and to understand well the message of the Gospel and what it means for every area of our lives. And I pray that you would create faith right now in this moment to understand in the hearts and souls of some for the very first time in the moment that they have no other hope but you. And may they reach out to you in faith, and seek you in mercy. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.