



Romans 13:1-7
“Where Does Authority Come From?”

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

ROMANS 13:1-7 "WHERE DOES AUTHORITY COMES FROM?"

How Are Christians To Live Under Pagan Authorities?

C. vv.1-7 SUBMISSION TO LEGITIMATE GOVERNANCE AND AUTHORITY// 12:14-21.

Not A Blank Endorsement Of Empire: Do Good, Pay Taxes, Give Honor, Not Worship

Controversial Passage, Teaching For Paul's Day, Not A Complete Statement

1) v.1 Command To Be Subject And Theological Reason: A Thesis. God Is A Higher Government

12:16-19, //Plutarch, *To An Uneducated Ruler*, 3

1a Let every person **be subject** to the governing **authorities**. Command 1: Subject Yourself, Titus 3:1, 1 Pt. 2:13-14

Recognize Subordinate Position In An Ordered Society, A Fallen World

b For there is no authority 2 Sam. 12:8, Jer. 27:5-7, 29:7. Jn. 19:11, Lk. 4:6, Reason 1: Authority Grounded In God

except from God, Theocentric Creation Perspective, The Office? The Person? Double Statement

c and those that exist Not New Ground, Dan. 2:21, 4:32, *Prov. 8:15-16*, Sir. 10:4, Governments? Positions? People?

have been instituted by God. Reason 2: A Pervasive Belief In Ancient World, Imperial & Local Offices

1 Cor. 8:6, In Paul's World, Rome Allowed To Rule, Bear The Sword, 1 Clement 60:4, 61:1

See Acts 5:29, Rev. 13, 17 On Roman Power Become Demonic

2) vv.2-3a Good And Bad Conduct: "Judgment" (Inference And Observance). The Need

It Is God Who Structures And Orders Societies

2 Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, Consequence 1: Resist God

and those who resist will incur judgment (condemnation). Now (authorities), And Later (God).

57-58AD, At This Point Nero Not Yet A Tyrant, General Principle

3a For rulers are not a terror (fear) to GOOD conduct, 2 Cor. 11:25? Nero's Pogrom of 64AD??

but to bad Reason: Resist Bad, Rom. 8:36, R. Hanina, *m. 'Abot* 3.2

God Works Through Agents, At Its Best, Government Restrains Evil

2') vv.3b-4 Good And Bad Conduct: "Wrath" (Question And Answer).

Shift: Move To Diatribe = *You*

b Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Still In The Abstract, Level Of Principle, Question?

And Of The God Behind Him?

+a Then do what is good, //1 Pt. 2:13-14, 3:13, Answer A

b and you will receive his approval, Not Always True In The Case Of Evil Rulers

4 c for he is God's servant for your GOOD. Not Divine! Social Order Helps Us Seek *The Good*

Answer B, Anticipates God's Final Judgment

-a' But if you do wrong, Promote The General Welfare, Put Down Rebellions, Hold Evil In Check

b' be afraid, 12:19-20, Metaphor, Order Is Necessary For Good

c' for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath (retribution) on the wrongdoer. Not Divine

Government Bluntly Restrains The Floodwaters Of Evil

1') vv.5-7 Command To Be Subject And Reason Of Conscience. //Mk. 12:28-34

//1 Pt. 2:13-17, 1 Tim. 2:1-3, Titus 3:1-3

5 Therefore one must **be subject**, External (wrath), Internal (conscience/ moral awareness), Command: Be Subject

not only to avoid God's wrath (retribution) but also for the sake of conscience. Reason: Moral Compass = Conscience

Outward Conformity Is Inadequate, Eye To God

6 For the same reason you also pay taxes, Vs. Current Jewish Zealots, Command: Pay

for the **authorities** are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Authority (5x, vv.1, 2b, 3, 6), Reason

7a Pay all of them their dues (what is owed), Command: Pay, Mk. 12:17

b Tribute to whom tributes are due, (direct tax owed to state) Flourish: 4 Lines Of 5 Words

taxes to whom taxes are due, (indirect tax: tolls, customs) Duty Specified: Money

fear to whom respect is due, Attitude In An Honor/Shame Society, Hierarchical Ordered

honor to whom honor is due. Attitude/Deference, 1 Pt. 2:17

Avoid Unnecessary Conflict With Local Officials In Rome

Benefits Of Rome, This Passage Has Occasioned Much Thought Over 2000 Years, Setting Of Increasing Jewish Ferment Before AD 66.

We Are Citizens Of Heaven Who Live With The Earthly Realities And The Powers Of The Present, Evil Age

CHURCH COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13:1-7

United Methodist Teaching: "Of the Duty of Christians to the Civil Authority"

"It is the duty of all Christians, and especially of all Christian ministers, to observe and obey the laws and commands of the governing or supreme authority of the country of which they are citizens or subjects or in which they reside, and to use all laudable means to encourage and enjoin obedience to the powers that be." (*The Book of Discipline* 2012: 70; this is a legislative enactment, not part of our Church Constitution. It's precise status has never been tested.)

"One of the purposes of the church is to create a virtuous people who can bear the weight of freedom and responsibility."

WHERE DOES AUTHORITY COME FROM?

“For there is no authority except from God.”

The obligation to hear and obey is grounded in God’s design.

R O M A N S 1 3 : 1 b

It was the largest disappearance of human beings in history, and it happened here in the U.S. Seven million in a single day. Did you not hear about it. Was it the supposed rapture? Nope. An unreported genocide? No. An ignored tsunami? No. Were they all secret aliens beamed back up to the mother ship? No. It was April 15, 1987, and instead of merely listing the name of each dependent child, filers were now required to add a Social Security number for verification. Seven million dependents who existed as exemptions in 1986 suddenly disappeared, about ten percent of all dependent children in the country. Poof! Gone! Vanished without a trace!

In the 1980s, John S. was an I.R.S. officer who’d seen enough audits to know many were claiming false dependants as exemptions. He recalls one named *Fluffy*- obviously a pet, not a child. The simplest way to fix the mess was to require taxpayers to list their children's Social Security numbers; his idea was ignored. A few years later, with Congress clamoring for more revenue, the idea was put into law for 1986. When returns came in the following April, John and his bosses were stunned: 7 million dependents had suddenly vanished from the tax rolls. Nearly \$3 billion in new money was generated!¹

For Christians, each April 15 is a conscience check. First towards God: Am I a tither or moving in that direction? The giving record we send you at the

¹ Steven Levitt, Stephen Dubner, *Freakonomics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2005), 21, 239.

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end of each year is your report. Secondly, Am I paying what I owe the U.S. and state governments, and am I doing it prayerfully with an eye to God and grateful for the benefits that come my way from a society ordered around freedom and justice and security? In verses 6 and 7 of Romans 13 the Apostle Paul speaks to both the proper payment and the right attitude:

“Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues: tribute to whom tributes are due, taxes to whom taxes are due,” and then a shift from direct and indirect taxes to proper deference, “fear to whom fear is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

If you lie to the government and sign your name, you lie to God, and—according to Paul— God is able to push back in all sorts of creative ways; it’s what the word *wrath* means; it is the effective divine love that pushes back against sin and evil, against theft and crime, and it is designed as pain and frustration to get your attention and call you to a better way, the way of integrity and to the trust that God can meet your needs without creative accounting!²

Followers of Jesus Christ are to be the best citizens, especially in a nation like ours with the freedoms and rights we enjoy, a situation the Apostle Paul could hardly have imagined. A liberal Western democracy set up as a Constitutional Republic and lasting for as long as ours is one of a kind, and the best way to guard it for posterity is to be a faithful participant through informed voting and full payment and regular prayer and reading and civic awareness and membership in a political party and knowing local officials and being a light user of government resources— particularly of the police and welfare systems— and becoming something of an expert on at least one issue of public concern, serving on local boards and even offering yourself for office or serving in the military if you are not a genuine conscientious objector, for which our

² For a treatment of God’s wrath in Paul, see Charles Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 56-59.

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government and our church provide special protections.³ The abandonment of civic engagement is a form of communal neglect, a political form of the deadly sin of *sloth*. We cannot keep subtracting from the reserves of civic capital and not making deposits, each of us through conscious engagement.

I think of myself as an educated man, and I am in certain areas. I do serious reading in and outside my discipline and serious writing every week. I've used the privilege of education to become a life-long student. The most valuable thing I received in seminary was a bibliography. To me class is in session every day, but there remains a huge, embarrassing gap in my Christian citizenship. I never took a civics course in high school or a government course in college. Why wasn't it required? It was the late 60's and early 70's I guess.

But a week ago today, while standing at a book store checkout after a painful visit at the Augusta V.A. Hospital with a veteran I love, I looked to my left, and there in a rack was a blue and red pocket-sized book, *The Constitution of the United States of America with the Declaration of Independence*.⁴ I bought it and am digesting the primary documents starting with *The Declaration*. Shame on me! To be so long a citizen, to have stood in awe before both documents in the National Archives, and yet never to have carefully read and inspected them! I've also signed up for a free college course, *Constitution 101*, and bought the reader.⁵ It's not too late for me to be a citizen!

The renewal of the church begins with engaging the primary documents, the Scripture and the lenses through which we read them, the classic Trinitarian Creeds,⁶ all in order to know and love and obey the Lord Jesus and to re-welcome the Holy Spirit into our midst.⁷ And one path to the renewal of a

³ *The Book of Discipline 2012*: 138.

⁴ (New York, NY: Fall River Press, 2012).

⁵ Hillsdale College, http://info.hillsdale.edu/constitution_101.

⁶ Nicene and Apostles', *The United Methodist Hymnal*: 880-881.

⁷ On this program of an explicit theological reading in partnership with the great creeds, see William J. Abraham, et. al., *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids,

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distinctively Christian citizenship is to study the primary documents. I am repenting of my ignorance and looking forward to new learning. And I've already discovered that the principles of biblical interpretation, since they focus on a fixed text with authority, are similar to the principles of constitutional interpretation, since they also focus on an authoritative text with a history of interpretation known as *jurisprudence*, literally *the wisdom of the law*.

The weekly writing of biblical sermons have never been for me a *ho-hum* experience but a primary and prayerful encounter. I study under God's searchlight and expect to be illumined and changed, and what I learn in private, I offer in public that the Holy Spirit may change you through truth applied. For the Christian, repentance— which is the discipline of turning and returning to God— has a beginning, but never ends. When I stop turning, I stop following. So on the day before July 4, let me stir you with what's stirred me this week, a single paragraph from Romans 13, all the more remarkable because of the setting in which it was written. Not in a democracy but under an all powerful Caesar who welcomed divine honors. Only in recent times have Christian lived under representative democracies because they are— historically speaking— a recent invention. Two hundred forty one years ago we had a king, one George III, and most Christians have been ruled by such, some good, some not so.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Authority Above Us: Government And God (13:1-7).

It was the mid—to—late 50's of the first century, perhaps AD 56 or 57, and Paul was writing a long letter to a church he'd not yet visited- the church in Rome. Nero was then Emperor, but had not yet begun to behave as badly as he would in the near future. No Christians were as yet torches at his garden parties.⁸ Paul was not yet a head shorter through decapitation— as he would be in eight or so years, a swifter penalty than crucifixion and reserved for citizens convicted of

MI: Eerdmans, 2008), especially Paul Gavriluk, "Scripture and the *Regula Fidei*: Two Interlocking Components of the Canonical Heritage," 27-42.

⁸ www.christiancourier.com/articles/623-nero-caesar-and-the-christian-faith.

treason or other crimes. Calling Jesus *Lord*, a term applied to the Emperor, was probably what did Paul in. Nero did not like anyone else using his title!

Across the Mediterranean in Judea, the land of Jesus, Jewish nationalists—what the Roman called *terrorists*—were advocating non-payment of Roman taxes, a move that would a decade later lead to war and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple by Titus in 70AD.⁹ Christians, wrote Paul, were not to be involved in such peripheral issues and political rebellion; it would lead only to disaster, and did. “Pay all your taxes,” he said bluntly. Christians who behaved as good citizens would be more or less free to gossip and spread their new faith in Jesus along the roads and sea lanes of the Empire with its relative law and order. For a people who claimed the risen Jesus and not Emperor Nero as Lord and who pledged allegiance to a new and coming kingdom ruled by a once-dead Jew named Jesus, one had to be careful not to be misunderstood, and the easiest way was to stay low-profile and invisible.¹⁰

So far as possible, and without giving worship to the Emperor, the followers of Jesus were to live in peace, pay taxes, offer respect without worship, and increase their sphere of influence through the love of neighbor and exemplary living.¹¹ Live in such a way it raises the question, “Why are you people so different? Who are you anyway?” And when asked, you tell your story as entwined with the Jesus story and the larger Jewish story. It was radical because it went down to basic loyalties; it was cooperative because it was so respectful. It’s a mission strategy that’s worked in many places, but not in all.

⁹ Charles Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1992), 296; Michael F. Bird, *Romans: The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 441-443.

¹⁰ For a collection of articles, see Scot McKnight, Joseph B. Modica, editors, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire Studies* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2016).

¹¹ On this effective strategy, see Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became An Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006).

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There would be times in the future when governments would grow demonic and overtly hostile to the faith and when other texts and tactics in the church's arsenal would be deployed, but now was not one of those times for Paul or his hearers.¹² For the most part the church was able to fly under the radar and make its witness to new life in Christ. If you weren't a trouble maker, trouble rarely came looking for you. Persecution was local and sporadic in the early years. You hid under the legal umbrella of Jewish legitimacy, told how the God of the Jews had sent the Son as a new fulfillment of the old ways and avoided being labeled a *superstitio*, an unapproved, dangerous new faith.¹³

It was not yet the purge of Nero. It was not yet the full on persecution of the late third and early fourth centuries. It was not the crisis of conscience of the American South of the 1850's or the German Church of the 1930's or the South African Church under apartheid or the Syrian believers currently under ISIS. The world of Paul was relatively stable due to the reach of Roman authority, and the church was largely invisible, permeating the Empire a little at a time as new churches were planted in urban area and radiating out to towns and villages.

Our political witness as Christians is always a combination of genuine respect, bold confession, sincere apologetics, a willingness to suffer and even die, but in most times and places the sealing our faith with death is not required. We work within the given structures of authority while we wait and work for the coming government of God for which are the advance witness.¹⁴

Such is the case in these United States this July 3, 2016 - two hundred and

¹² Revelation 3 and 7 regard Roman power as demonic and the state as Satan's servant; it now asks for loyalty and worship that belong to God alone. On early Jewish and Christian options as regards the state, see Talbert, *Romans*, 294ff.

¹³ Bird, *Romans*, 442, note 1.

¹⁴ Kingdom thinking is making a resurgence in the church. See Ben Witherington III, *Imminent Domain: The Story of the Kingdom of God and Its Celebration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); for a more edgy angle, Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), Chapter 7, "The Revolt Against Nationalism," 77-90.

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forty years into our national experiment in government of, by, and for the people, to quote President Lincoln. While the culture may be shifting away from moral absolutes towards a fluid, postmodern *whatever-feels-good* secularism and relativism, and while many mourn the loss of Christian influence in the public square, the plain fact is that freedom of religious speech and assembly remain Constitutional rights; contributions remain tax deductible, and we are free to worship and evangelize in a nation where the church still has many positive associations.¹⁵ So if Paul gave the counsel he did in a world under the dictatorship of a polytheistic Emperor, how much more should we follow his wisdom in a republic like ours where we privileges and protections Paul could not imagine? That we elect and replace leaders by popular vote instead of war would have struck him as a miracle.

Beneath Paul's counsel to his friends in Rome are two prior convictions drawn from Scripture and confirmed in experience. First, that we live in a fallen, sinful, evil-infested world where nothing works as intended, where self is the center and rebellion the order of the day. The human heart is wicked, a factory of idols and false loyalties; vice is everywhere, and no one is safe.¹⁶ Secondly, that without the restraint of government as enforced by the sword, chaos rules. It's why we speak of our police as the *thin blue line*, and why God has given government as a necessary structure of life outside Eden and this side of the kingdom of God.

¹⁵ For a fresh assessment of our situation in the West, see Os Guinness, *Impossible People: Christian Courage And The Struggle for the Soul of a Civilization* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2016), especially Chapter 4, "Exploring the Heart of Darkness," 115-141.

¹⁶ On the idea of original sin, see Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008). U.M. Doctrine is found in "Article VII- Of Original or Birth Sin: Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually" (*The Book of Discipline* 2012: 65.) We are by doctrine pessimists on human nature and optimists on the possibilities of divine grace.

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Having forfeited the direct rule of God, which will one day return with Jesus, we now live with various forms of fallible human government, from the tribal chief and village elders to the elected heads of modern states and bicameral legislatures, and everything in between. Look at Somalia and Libya and Afghanistan and northern Pakistan and Libya and Syria for what happens without strong government and the rule of law. We called them *failed states*, and the return to the old tribal ways is the new wave of the Middle East now that the artificial borders imposed by the victorious colonial powers after WWI are coming loose.¹⁷ Warlords and pirates, terrorists and thugs rule, and who suffers? The weak, as always, and many of them are our people— Christians.

Thus the authority and legitimization that stands behind the structures of government is *from God*. In our world as it now is, life must be ordered by power because each of us are disordered by nature. The necessity of government and the threat and use of force is a witness to the universal fact of sin that must be restrained locally by police and sometimes beyond our borders by Armed Forces, and this sense fear is a good thing. It makes you think twice.

As I often tell people in trouble, God has two hands. One has nail holes in the wrists; the other bears a sword. And if you do not deal with the first- the gospel of Jesus, then you will deal with the second to curb your misguided desires with state coercion, starting with a warning ticket all the way up to capital punishment, however far you wish to take it. Read the weekly arrest reports in the Greenwood paper for the recent examples; that some are members of churches is an indictment of our lack of accountability. Magistrates ought to subpoena pastors and church boards, “Why are your people behaving so badly? Why are you Christians clogging our judicial system?”

So, on the whole, Christians ought to have little involvement with the law. Some civil matters, but no lawsuits with other believers and no criminal matters

¹⁷ For an eye-opener from an Israeli scholar of Arabic literature, see Dr. Mordecai Kedar, “What Went Wrong With The Middle East: Part I, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wngES1woo0A. Part II completes the lecture.

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at all.¹⁸ Law and police are rough and blunt instruments of God and in their right usage are to be- in the words of Paul- *a terror to bad conduct*. If ruled internally by the law of God and Spirit of Christ, we will be preserved against most entanglements. It will be easier and not harder for us to live under whatever governments are over us. Much of our whining is ignorance; we don't realize how good we have it here in the richest, freest nation in history where the assertion of individual rights has become a national obsession.

This is why Paul calls us to willing subjection to the necessary constraints of being governed as part of a larger societal order that restrains evil and promotes the good of the general welfare, whether in first century Rome or twenty-first century America. Governments differ in their moral legitimacy, but the idea and structure of government itself is from God for the rough ordering of a fallen world and the mission of the church. Thus verse 1, "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." If Paul could say that of Rome in his day, how much more of us in ours? We are to be a people who bring fame to our Lord by our good actions.

But Paul also warns his friends in Rome that their faith is no insulation against consequences if they misbehave, verse 4: "But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer." Prisons are full of the baptized, and to find out the truth about church members you only have to interview local law enforcement or visit court records. So when you see a blue light, or when you receive notice of an audit, be aware that God- and not just the government- is ringing your bell. We are, says Paul, to live in such a way that we have no need to fear the authorities. And when we habitually live any other way, we bring shame on the name of Christ and his church.

When the Islamic Ottoman Empire threatened Europe five hundred years ago, Martin Luther made a bold pronouncement, "The Turk is the rod of God's anger against the apostate church, so opposition to it must begin with

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 6:1-8 for an alternative of church courts for disputes between believers.

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repentance, prayer, and preaching God's Word."¹⁹ So what would Dr. Luther say to our battle with radical Islam today? Perhaps the same? Have a post-Christian Europe and a teetering America unleashed the fountain of God's wrath? Is there more to our troubles than we see? I think so. Twenty-five years of being bogged down in the longest conflict in our history, and one from which it seems impossible to extract ourselves. What is going on?

The first seven verses of Romans 13 teach that there is authority *above us* at two levels: 1) the authority of governments to restrain evil and promote good, and 2) above government the providence of a sovereign God at work through his chosen agents, even if they do not believe in him. In his First Inaugural, Thomas Jefferson echoed the ideas of Paul when he reminded the nation that our happiness and prosperity rested upon "a wise and frugal Government, *which shall restrain men from injuring one another....*"²⁰ So the basis of these seven verses I ask several questions:

Are you involved in any illegal, shady, or hidden activities? Stop them today, or risk being exposed and shamed by God in public.

Are you honest in all your finances, including tithes and taxes? Get your house in order.

Do you speak well of officials and thank them for their work? Ruling such a people as us is not always pleasant or easy.

Have you gotten to know the police chief or sheriff and thanked them for their work of guarding the gift of public safety?

Have you written your representatives and pledged your prayer? The wisdom needed is immense and the moral pressures unrelenting.

Jack Abramoff, the flashy Washington lobbyist disgraced in a 2006 scandal, later confessed, "God sent me 1,000 hints that he didn't want me to keep doing what I was doing. But I didn't listen, so he set off a nuclear bomb."²¹

¹⁹ Paul Borthwick, "Praying for the Powers that Be," *Discipleship Journal* (November/December 2005).

²⁰ Jean Yarborough, "All Honor to Jefferson," *Imprimis*, May/June 2009, 2.

²¹ PreachingToday.com search under Romans 13.

How many warnings and promptings of conscience did John Edwards and Mark Sanford receive before exposure? Two men of different parties who might one day each have been President are now the butt of jokes because their personal gifts and ambitions took them places beyond the depth of their character and the reach of their self-control. It is good to be reminded that our good and holy God cares more about character than career, more about personal salvation than political reputation; God cares that promise-making be followed by promise-keeping, especially in marriage to which a warning is attached by Jesus himself, “Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder,” *or else I will get you* is the rest of the implied curse formula.

We may in these tolerant days divide life into public and personal arenas and seek to keep them separate, but God never does, and when the gap of integrity grows too large, judgment kicks in as private failures have public consequences. My experience is that people run through many red lights before they finally hit the wall of public shame and exposure. The fact is that God has every right to expose and utterly humiliate all us Christians on our little or large stages if we ignore the warnings of conscience and the counsel of Scripture.

Though I am no prophet, the days may come when we are not so free and when it may be a hate crime to read certain portions of Scripture in public, or when our tax exempt status is revoked, but if we practice righteousness now while it’s easy, we will be ready if *the painful then* ever comes. And right now, I tell you, we are not ready. We are weak and compromised and rebellious and undisciplined, with bishops and pastors too often leading the way in the wrong direction. We are not chaplains to the culture and its shifting, shallow civic religion; we are a witness and reminder that a new world is already on the way, a world where Jesus rules.

So obey the laws of the nation with an eye to God’s large providences, and obey the laws of the love of neighbor to make Christ known where you live and work. Christian faith is deeply and unavoidable personal, but never merely private. It’s meant to have public effects and to ripple outwards from the center. It’s never just me and Jesus, but me and Jesus and my neighbors near and far to the edges of the earth.

Ours is a faith of deep personal transformation in the midst of an historic Christian community which contains the treasures of the saints and all the means of grace necessary to carry us through his life and into the kingdom. Friends, Romans, Fellow Countrymen of the American Empire, Christians in the land of the free and the home of the brave, it's time to wake up, time to put our eyes on the prize, time to go to war with ourselves, time to take off the dirty rags of familiar and comforting sins and put on the light filled garments of Christ. Transformation begins, not with you but *with me*, not *up there* in Washington or *out there* in the culture but *in here*:

Don't ask God to change your family; ask God to change you.

Don't ask God to change your workplace; ask God to change you.

Don't ask God to change where you live; ask God to change you.

Don't ask God to change your government; ask God to change you, to make you the kind of person through whom God can gain leverage at any and every point.

CONCLUSION

It would be a mistake to ask of these verses more than intended. They are not a comprehensive political philosophy. What they offer is the vision that our God cares about the whole of life and that there are understandings to be applied to each circle of concern, from the depth of the heart out through the neighbor and all the way to the heights of power.

Yes, I am concerned about the health of our national experiment, what with its twenty five years of war, a shaky economy, a spending frenzy, celebrity worship invading politics, our loss of a common moral compass, but I am more concerned about the church. Frittering away the substance of the faith a bit at a time for the sake of *keeping up with the times* and *appeasing the culture* is insane because once begun the retreat never stops.

So may God have mercy on me a sinner; and may God have mercy upon the church in our land; and may God have mercy on the people of these United States. Our lives and our histories and our future are so deeply intertwined.

I leave you with a story from Michael Blakely who writes:

“While I was in grad school, I stopped for coffee in a Malibu restaurant. Coming from a non-political family, I knew nothing of political activists, but I met one that day in that restaurant. He told everyone what a mess the United States had become. He ridiculed our government and our educational, industrial, and banking systems.

He was on such a roll that he had everyone on his side except for two people: an old man and me. The activist shied away from me, seeing my Pepperdine University hat, Ronald Reagan tee shirt, and Wall Street Journal. So he went after the old man.

As he approached, the old man continued slurping his soup and turned his back. The activist sat down at the old man's table, "Mister, if you can tell me just one thing the United States has ever done for you, just one measly thing, I will leave you alone."

The old man looked up. He licked his spoon clean and set it down on the table. His red face indicated years of laboring in the sun. With a heavy Russian accent, he replied, "Ve hold zees truz to be self-evident, dat all men created equal, life, liberty, perzuit of happiness." He went back to his bowl, and the complainer said not a word. He could not argue against what the old man had experienced on both sides of communism.²²

Love your grand, glorious, messy county because it is the best on record thus far. Reinvest as citizens in the public square. But love God even more. Reinvest in the church in this place, and follow Jesus Christ as a disciple along with others. Pray for the nation and the church because both are precious gifts from God, and both are so easily weakened and distorted by neglect. We are never more than a generation away from losses we could never recover in several lifetimes. Wake up, America. Wake up, Christians. Much is at stake.

²² PreachingToday.com search under Romans 13:1-7.

A LITANY FOR THE CHURCH AND THE NATION

On this the Sunday before Independence day, with a grateful heart for the gift of this nation, and with an eye to the justice and mercy of Almighty God, let us pray for the church and our beloved country, the United States of America.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For the providence of God who guided this new nation dedicated to proposition that all are created equal in worth and that our fundamental rights come from God alone.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For the churches that grew up along with the nation, whose faith in Jesus Christ stirred compassion on a thousand fronts and whose people, formed by God's commandments and the hope of heaven, lent strength and purpose and moral restraint to every endeavor.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For public schools, for hospitals and children's homes, for laws and their restraints, for colleges and universities, free elections and a free press, for the right of assembly, the right to start a business, and all the privileges we presume but which the rest of the world envies.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For our President, for the Senate and House, for our Governors and state legislatures, for all who hold elected office or serve in government, that they fear God more than the public, and that they serve with integrity and diligence and the common good be guarded.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For the Bible and its deep influence on our concepts of justice and freedom, for its being read in churches every Sunday, and for every church that stands over against the worst in our world as a genuine alternative.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For our armed forces and their dangerous duties, that they serve with an eye to the mercies of God, that Christian chaplains stay faithful to Jesus, and that those who bear the wounds of war in body and mind not be neglected but honored among us all as long as they live.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For a new birth of Christian citizenship and fresh attention to civic duties so long neglected or delegated. That we will pray for our leaders, that we will work so as not to be a burden on the public treasury, that we will save and invest to create jobs, that we will tithe that the church may make its witness and the poor be provided for, that we may live and serve and die as those who follow Jesus Christ and love the world for which he came. May God Almighty renew his church in our day, and may he preserve and heal and defend us all.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**
