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**“Romans 13: Revisited”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
July 8, 2018
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 82; Romans 13:1-14**

Recently, a prominent government official used these first few verses of Romans 13 to defend the right of our government to enforce an immigration policy, a policy since overturned, that separated children from their parents as the family crossed the border without the required documentation. He said, “I would cite to you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes.”

What?! Are you kidding me?!

Friends, I have not been in the pulpit since these words were spoken, but I have not been able to set aside the incredible number of problems with this uncalled-for scriptural justification of a governmental taunt “we can do whatever we want and you have to obey us” and I doubt you have either.

Now I suppose we could just ignore this recent turn of events and say, rightly, that the passage was taken out of context. Or we could just disregard it as something Paul had to say in case his letter was intercepted by Roman officials on its way to Rome. But I know some of you well enough to know that when you read this passage, and when people use it to justify

injustice, you want a solid understanding why this was *not* the way Paul intended for this passage to be used. Ultimately, it all comes down to context.

Now I need to warn you, we are going to get into the weeds a little bit as we sort this passage out, but hopefully you will come with me in this and we will get to the end together.

We begin by remembering this is not the first time in history that Romans 13 has been used to call citizens to obey governmental laws – and it won't be the last. During the time of the American Revolution, loyalists referred to this passage to encourage obedience to the King and Parliament. In 1850, supporters of slavery cited these verses in light of the Fugitive Slave Act which required citizens to return escaped slaves to bondage.

In Germany, in the late thirties and early forties, the conservative Protestant “German Christians,” called upon this passage to demand that Christians give total allegiance to Adolph Hitler. In South Africa, during Apartheid, white Christians used Romans 13 to call the people to submit to the racial power arrangement in place at the time.¹

And I am just scratching the surface.

So how, then, did Paul intend for us to understand this passage if not as a call blindly to follow and obey any and all governmental laws?

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Julia Jacobs, “Sessions’s Use of Bible Passage to Defend Immigration Policy Draws Fire,” June 15, 2018, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/us/sessions-bible-verse-romans.html>, (accessed 7-6-18),

<https://books.google.com/books?id=R3QNBQAAQBAJ&lpg=PA55&dq=%22misreading%20of%20romans%2013%22%20gushee&pg=PA55#v=onepage&q=%22misreading%20of%20romans%2013%22%20gushee&f=false>, (accessed 7-6-18), Winsome Munro, “Romans 13:1-7 Apartheid's Last Biblical Refuge,” November 1, 1990, *Sage Journals*, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/014610799002000405?journalCode=btba&>, (accessed 7-6-18).

Buckle your seatbelts folks and put on your oxygen masks. We are about to go for a deep dive into this text.

First, we need to understand the context in which Paul is writing. He writes this letter to a small group of early Christians in the heart of the Roman Empire. They are governed by an imperial dictatorship, the Emperor Nero. Paul, who is looking out for his people, knows that this new band of Christians cannot suddenly begin to disregard civil law. They must pay their taxes, of course, but they also must not be tempted to violence or vengeance and should seek to keep the peace. Order is a part of God's good creation, after all, including the ordering of human affairs, and the law helps keep our sinful nature in check. You know it does. I guarantee you I didn't drive more than two miles over the speed limit for at least three years after getting a speeding ticket while on a NC backroad with the windows down while belting out Rick Springfield's "Jesse's Girl." So yes, there is good reason for just laws and as Christians we should follow laws that guide us toward the good.²

There are at least two situations where a particular government may no longer be a part of supporting God's good order in the world. The first happens when a government demands ultimate allegiance. Paul knows and

² Regarding the paying of taxes: Following worship on the day I preached this sermon one of our active worshippers, a retired professor of New Testament, Robert Brawley, approached me and shared information on Romans 13:1-7 that he had learned from Michael Wolter's recent exegesis of this text. He later shared with me a brief written summary of his comments, which I include here for those who might be interested, as I was.

"A crucial part of Wolter's exegesis is the distinction between (1) a third person reference to the universal inevitability (πᾶσα ψύχη, Rom 13:1) of being subject to governing authorities (vv. 1-5) and (2) the shift to the second person plural in vv. 6-7. Accordingly, in vv. 1-5 Paul describes a general condition of what is involuntarily normative for subjects of the Roman Empire, which naturally includes his readers. But the object of the second person plural imperative τελεῖτε in v. 6 is the startling term φόρος ("tribute," not "taxes"), startling because tribute was required from foreign subjected people but not for residents of Rome such as Paul's readers. Wolter deduces from this incongruity that φόρος is pushed to a metaphoric level as a symbol of governing such that believers in Rome were subject to Roman authorities as if they were foreigners. That is, with respect to their allegiance to Jesus as their Lord they were like foreigners to Roman authorities. True, the text takes these authorities to be a part of the divine establishment of governing, but this is a widely distributed presupposition throughout diverse cultures of Mediterranean antiquity. Furthermore, governing authorities do not represent God. Rather they are tools of God."

asserts with absolute clarity that our ultimate allegiance is to God alone. A former professor of mine writes beautifully, if a bit academically, about this situation:

A government that claims for itself the total and absolute devotion which a creature can give only to its Creator, ceases in the moment it makes that claim to be an agent of divine order, or a divine servant. It has become instead an idolatrous opponent of the living God. Governments that claim for themselves divine prerogatives are hence no longer the kind of governments of which Paul speaks in this chapter.³

Additionally, these governments must also be agents of *good* and not evil. Should the role of the government reverse and no longer pursue good and what is from God, they would no longer fall under Paul's description of government under the authority of God. So agrees John Calvin when he writes, ". . . tyrannies, and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder, are not an ordained government"

If then a government claims for itself the kind of devotion proper only to God [writes Paul Achtemeier] and demands of its subjects that they perform evil rather than good, and if it punishes those who disobey such demands to do evil, that government no longer functions as a servant of God and is therefore no longer to be obeyed as such.⁴

This is the conclusion the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to when faced with the evil power behind the Holocaust. He had to "rethink all he had previously taken for granted. Sometimes it was

³ Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation Series, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1985), 204.

⁴ Ibid.

necessary, he mused, ‘not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself. . . .’⁵

Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who preached and spoke against the evils of his government, once said in a sermon, “Let it be quite clear that if we are being asked to collaborate with a pseudo-peace, a false order, based on repression and fear, we must recall that the only order God wants is one based on truth and justice.”⁶

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa recognized the evils of Apartheid laws and used civil disobedience to lead the church to work for justice of all and transformative change.

As we celebrated Independence Day this week, many of us realized how fortunate we are to be able to live in a democracy where we can speak out against laws or situations we believe are unjust. Many of us marched in Raleigh in May to push for better pay, resources and support for our teachers, children, and public education. Many marched in April to seek stronger gun control laws. And more recently, many showed up for the “Keep Families Together” march with the desire to change policies affecting those seeking asylum at the U.S./Mexico border. Many have also called or written their representatives about these and other concerns. These things cannot be done in many countries around the world. As a part of July 4th celebrations, I hope we remembered the kind of independence we have in our democracy which gives us a serious and safe way to work for change.

That being said, we still must caution against using scripture to justify blind obedience to government and this is why the passage must be

⁵ Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 379.

⁶ Rutledge. 383.

addressed. A broader context for this passage might help us understand it even better.

In the context of the broad Biblical canon – The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament - we know of times when faithful people went against the laws of the land because they were unjust and in opposition to the desire of God – like when the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah feared God more than the king of Egypt and did not kill the male sons of the Hebrew slaves, as the king had commanded, but let them live.

Later in Exodus Moses and Aaron speak and act against the Pharaoh in order to free the Israelites from slavery. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown in the fiery furnace for refusing to worship a golden statue and Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den for continuing to pray three times daily to God.

In the Gospels, Jesus heals on the Sabbath and overturns the tables in the Jerusalem Temple. In Acts 5, the apostles were commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus, but they continued to do so, saying, “we must obey God rather than any human authority.” God’s commands are summed up in the law of love in Leviticus and the gospels – love God and love your neighbor. Human authority which goes against God’s commands to love is no longer authority ordained by God. Even Paul says this clearly in verse 8 of Romans 13, one verse shy of the section quoted recently, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Paul is abundantly clear in his letter to the Romans that Jesus is Lord. Jesus has come to fulfill the law in love and calls us to love one another. Paul writes:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. . . . extend hospitality to strangers.

. . . Live in harmony with one another. . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (portions of 12:9-21).

For Paul, in relation to governmental powers, based on the context of chapters 12 and 13, “both unquestionable obedience and violent revolt are improper responses to the authorities. On the one hand the authorities must not be obeyed when they are not acting as God’s servants; on the other hand, violent revolt does not fall into the category of overcoming evil with love.”⁷ This, in the end, is what led Martin Luther King, Jr. to non-violent civil disobedience. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he writes:

[B]asically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

He goes on to talk about the difference between unjust laws and just laws. He writes:

I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."⁸

The recent law that called for the separation of families at the border was unjust. It was not based on the law of love of neighbor. It was not of God. Thankfully, this law has been reversed.

As disturbing as this law was, however, perhaps equally disturbing was the quickness with which a governmental authority used scripture to justify an unjust policy, calling for obedience to the law as a domineering parent

⁷ Matt Anslow, “Romans 13 and Civil Disobedience,” October 6, 2014, *Ethos*, <http://www.ethos.org.au/online-resources/engage-mail/romans-13-and-civil-disobedience> (accessed 7-6-18).

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed 7-6-18).

would demand a child to follow an order “because I said so,” or in this case, “Because God said so.” But God did not say so and a reading of Paul that leads to blind obedience to injustice is an incomplete and false reading. Our God would never support that which went against God’s very being of love, grace, and mercy shown most clearly to us in Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, friends, we must be about the work of discernment so that we might seek together to understand what is of God and what is not. This requires communal worship, study, and prayer as we seek to understand where God is at work and where God calls us to join in that work. As preacher Fleming Rutledge says, “the future belongs to the Lord. It is not our part to bring that future about. God is doing that. Our part is to discern the signs of what God is already doing and to take up our positions there, knowing that God’s future of human liberty and human wholeness is, truly, to live for . . . Wherever God is on the move, [wherever God’s love is most evident], that is where we want to be.”⁹

That is where we want to be.

In the name of our Holy God, Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining One.
Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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⁹ Rutledge, 388.