

For the past month and a half, we've been asking the question, "for whom shall we pray?" In the process we've delved into what our scriptures and tradition have to say about enemies, those close to us, the world, and the church. Today we're going to continue that question by looking at Paul's advice to the Roman church. If we are a people of prayer, what does that mean for our relationship to authority? Let us read together from the letter to the Romans, beginning at chapter twelve, verse twenty-one and ending at chapter thirteen, verse seven.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due,

honour to whom honour is due.

This is the Word of the Lord.

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We don't much like the language of submission or the idea of being obedient to authority. Remember when you were a kid and you arguing with your parents about something that you wanted to do and they didn't, or something that they did want you to do that you didn't want to do – you'd invariably ask the timeless childhood question: "Why?" Didn't it drive you crazy when they responded with the conversation stopper: "Because I told you so." Game over. Inviolable authority. You never wanted to hear those words. There were legends about brave kids who would try to fire back a rejoinder, but it didn't go so well. My son is two and as much as I will try to resist, I can see the future and there are many exasperated "because I told you so."

With those words ringing in our ears, we read passages like this morning's epistle reading from St. Paul and we sort of bristle wanting to move on to other, more communitarian passages. Most of us don't really like authority unless it's ours. It irks us to be under the authority of an employer. In autonomous, independent, free America, who wants to be subject to anything? We're spiritual descendents of Calvin, who knew that

human nature being what it is, we don't even want to be under the authority of God. So when we hear an authority figure like Paul tell us to be subject to the authority of the government – which derives from God's authority, it all seems a bit too much. So why do we pray for those in authority? And how do we do it?

I want to suggest that Paul's letter to the church in Rome offers us some perspective.

1) If we look carefully at the text, Paul's first move is to explain from whence authority ultimately comes. God's is the only authority and he is making the case that under God's ordering of human affairs as part of creation, God saw to it that we would seek out and build systems of governance. Part of who we are as humans, is to need and seek out authority. We crave leadership. Because this is the case it seems that the kind of subordination that Paul is calling for recognizes *whatever* power exists, accepts *whatever* political structure that happens to prevail. Let me be clear, he absolutely is not arguing that the powers that be are in any given place because of a particular providential act of God. It is not the case, as the National Socialists argued, that because Germany found itself under the control of Adolf Hitler, that this very fact was ample proof that the Nazi government was blessed by God. You'll notice that Paul never mentions Caesar by name, nor does he mention anything specific about his policies. The whole world, as he knew it, was under the rule of Caesar. Paul isn't

making the case that God created or instituted particular governments, only that there has been hierarchy and authority and power ever since human society existed because God so desired us to seek those structures, and God brings those structures, whatever they are, into line with divine purposes. This applies to democracies and dictatorships – they are not windows into the will of God, nevertheless they are used by God in the ordering of the cosmos.

Writing in 58 AD, under the reign of Nero, we can be assured that Paul knew a thing or two about brutal and oppressive governments. His immediate concern is to the Jewish Christian church in Rome. The historian Tacitus informs us that under Nero's reign there was a massive popular outcry against taxation. Except instead of campers in central park, picketing wall street, folks were engaging in violent protests and some were refusing to pay. So he is warning his readers against jumping on the popular bandwagon and encouraging them not to make unnecessary waves. At all times in all places, people have wanted to avoid taxation. At all times in all places, people have wanted the services that their taxes provide. At the same time back in Israel, Jewish nationalism is reaching a fever pitch. It's the kind of situation where anti-Roman sentiment would be hard for the Gentile Christians to distinguish from anti-Gentile sentiment. On this foundational level, we give thanks to God for this kind of authority if only because it is reflective of the goodness of creation. But, like all of creation, it is marred by sin.

2) Secondly, we pray for those in authority because Paul reminds us that there is a good and proper function of governmental authority. I was telling some of our High School students last week that in the first years after I got my driver's license I had this opinion that most stop signs should in fact be yield signs, and I had a bad habit of asserting my opinion upon an unwilling California Legal system. These are the things that you hope your pastors tell your students. It must have happened three or four times that I got pulled over for doing a Hollywood stop – the one where you slow down enough to check that no-one is coming and then carry on your merry way. The last of these judgment lapses, the officer who pulled me over, satisfied that I had not been drinking said, "I'm not going to give you a ticket this time, but I'm going to remember you, Mr. Good, and if I see you again, I'm going to make it hurt." Message received. I was much more conscientious about stopping after that. That's why we need authority, so that we don't assert ourselves beyond reasonable boundaries. To the extent that the authority of the state protects, Paul wants the church to see that it is actually serving God and is something to be thankful for. We enjoy a tremendous amount of security and stability in this country because of the way that our government is ordered, Paul reminds us that this too is a gift from God.

3) But what do we do when the government does not reward good and punish evil? How do we react when the government instead seems to be in collusion with the powers and principalities of darkness?

I'm working my way through Timothy Tyson's book *Blood Done Sign My Name* – it's the story of the murder of Henry Marrow, a 23 year old African American Vietnam veteran, gunned down in the streets of Oxford, North Carolina in 1970 for allegedly making a sexual remark to a white woman while buying groceries at a local shop. The men responsible for the brutal killing, Robert and Gerald Teel chased Marrow down, beat him to a pulp, shot and wounded another man whom they mistook for Marrow, and then shot Marrow repeatedly at close range in front of a number of witnesses. When the trial came about potential jurors were selected from two neighboring counties and despite the fact that one of those counties was two-thirds African-American and the other was one-third African-American, out of one hundred prospective jurors only nine were black. When the final selection of the jury came, all twelve were white. The verdict came with little deliberation: Teel was found not guilty on all counts from manslaughter to murder. The prosecutor was incredulous – he had each jury member was polled; each pronounced the words “Not Guilty”. Is that the kind of governance that reflects the glory of God? And yet Paul writes, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” Can this be right?

I wonder what consolation the Coptic Christians in Egypt, who have been increasingly vulnerable to government oppression, would find Paul's pronouncement, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God." Is this the kind of power that we are to be subject to? To be clear, Paul does not believe that anything that governments do is good human behavior, nor does he excuse the Roman church from exercising moral judgment. Remember, he is executed by Rome, imprisoned for preaching the gospel, yet even in prison, he cannot help but appeal to a higher authority. Nor does he try to convince us that the goodness of the authorities is self-evident – it is tied to the extent to which they "reward good and punish evil". They serve God by virtue of their distributing justice. So while all government receives its authority from God, we can assume that there are criteria whereby the goodness of government can be measured. We must be diligent in prayer that our leaders will pursue justice.

But the real heart of Paul's argument isn't found in chapter 13, it's in chapter 12. While we must pray for our leaders to realize that they are under the judgment of God, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that they are to live lives that match the conviction of their prayers. He tells them:

Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one

another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

His concern is pastoral and local. Far from being a treatise on church/state relationships, Paul’s letter to the Romans reminds those who would follow Jesus that they are a radical alternative to the world. Paul believed that to be a Christian is to be reshaped in all of your relationships by the cross of Christ – having a life, at its core, that is shaped by sacrificial love. So he’s saying, “some of you are angry about your taxes – then all of you gather your financial resources and help one another. God’s mercy will overcome hostility by creating you to be a people who have been so shaped by the cross that it reaches into the nuts and bolts of financial sharing.” In so doing you will bring the reign of God’s kingdom right into the midst of the

Empire. Regardless of whether the government is good, you Romans are Christians and in your love, you will overcome. You can endure all things because Christ has already endured all things. And in your life together, you exhibit an altogether different kind of politics.

Tyson's book is a loving, but ultimately crushing indictment of white Christian Oxford, North Carolina's failure to be transformed by the gospel, and instead be conformed to the patterns and prejudices of the culture.

I can't help but think of the confessing Church in Germany, who in the midst of a church that was being colonized by anti-Jewish sentiment, found the resources to say, "no." The main document of their dissent from the Nazi propaganda machinery, the Barmen Declaration – which is in our book of confessions – begins with none other than a call to prayer. Prayer for those in authority, but prayer also for the strength of the church to recognize that it is set apart, called to be holy, called to not conform to the patterns, prejudices, and tactics of the world – called to be a distinct community that the world needs to see if it is to know God. In the end Paul is saying to the Roman church "Remember that you are Christians. Your very life as a community is a form of prayer that will resemble God's will done on earth as it is in heaven."

May it be so with us.