

Good morning everyone, Welcome. It is great to be here today.

This morning I am continuing with the new series - Questions that you always wanted to ask your Pastor. Today we will be looking at obeying and being subject to the government and those in positions of authority.

Last year we looked at the book of Romans, and as we moved towards the end of the book, there were a couple of passages that I sidestepped around.

I decided not to tackle them.

But one of them came up in a question that I was given.

It is to do with the passage Romans 13:1-7

And the person who gave me this question, said look the passage in Romans that you didn't talk about tells us to obey and honour those in authority and in government. But what happens when the government isn't good, what do you do then? And what does it mean when you are trying to help those that society is not looking after? How does that work.

And that is a really good question and that is what we are looking at this morning.

So what does the passage in Romans say?

well I will read Romans 13:1-7

*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 them—taxes to whom taxes are due, customs duties to whom customs duties are due, respect to whom you owe respect, honor to whom you owe honor.*

This is a passage about the need to be subject, to obey governing authorities even if they are not followers of Jesus.

But does that always apply? Do people in authority have a divine right to do what they want and should we just follow them?

In Germany in the 1930's a lot of church leaders thought this passage meant that they should not speak up against Hitler when he rose to power and started to do evil things. And from our perspective today we would say - well those people certainly got that wrong.

So how do we interpret this passage of scripture, and how do we find out what the bible as a whole says about issues like this?

Well to understand passages of scripture it is important to understand their context. For example in this passage, Paul was writing a letter to the church in Rome, they had issues that they were working with, and what the advice in this passage meant for those people in that situation is the main thing that this passage means. It can be applied elsewhere to other circumstances, but that initial context is all important.

And then when we want to understand the big picture, what the bible as a whole means, we need to zoom out. We need to look at other passages of scripture as well, what other advice was given in different contexts, what other people did, what Jesus did, what other stories there are in the bible. And then when we combine everything together there is a richness. It is like cooking with lots of

ingredients, all of them being balanced together, or it is like a painting where we can see all of the colours and contrasts.

So looking first at this passage, what was the situation for those people in Rome? What was their context.

Well - there were not many Christians in Rome. They met as small groups in houses. Most were foreigners not Romans. They had no political power.

The authorities could make decisions that would affect them and they would not be able to do anything about it.

And in 49AD, not many years before this, the Jews had been kicked out of Rome for about 5 years because the authorities decided that they were causing trouble.

The Jewish people also had a history of trying to forcibly overthrow the Romans who were occupying Israel. Tens of thousands of people had been killed.

And at the time this letter was written, those followers of Jesus were viewed by Romans authorities as being sort of like the Jews and so they were looked at with suspicion. Were they friends of the Roman empire, or were they enemies. Maybe it was a bit like the way that Muslims were looked at in the United States after September the 11th.

And so the advice was given to the Christians in Rome by Paul to act wisely and to stay out of trouble. To pay taxes, to pay customs duties, to be respectful, to show honour. Those in charge of the Roman empire might not have been followers of Jesus, but God was still using them. So they needed to be shown respect.

James Dunn who has written a few commentaries on Romans summarise it well when he says

*"Paul's reminder is, in effect, to say: since you cannot change the terms under which you live, and since your position is already hazardous, remember the political realities of the politically powerless and live accordingly."*

And over time, when Christians live in countries and under governments where they are powerless, that is still wise advice.

And we can remember that those in authority may be put there by God, but that doesn't mean that they can do what they want and they will get away with it. God will judge them for what they do, and we can leave that to God. The verses at the end of Romans 12, just before this passage talk about God being the one who will judge.

But did this mean that the followers of Jesus in Rome always did what they were commanded to do by the authorities?

Well in Rome not many years later, followers of Jesus stood up against the governing authorities.

What happened was that the Roman emperor, began to see himself as a God, and demanded that people say "Caesar is Lord" declaring that the emperor was a God and that they need to worship him.

And followers of Jesus said no we can't say that since Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is the one who we are following. Jesus is our Lord and we are not going to worship the emperor.

By standing up, those followers of Jesus did the right thing, but because of what they did the authorities called them traitors and atheists. And many followers of Jesus were killed.

And that shows us that if those in power ask us to do something that is directly against what God has asked us to do, if there is a direct conflict, then we are to follow what God has told us to do.

But things like that do not happen very often.

So those are things that we can learn from Romans and that story, but what can we learn from what Jesus did and what can we learn from the stories in the Old Testament?

Well, when we see Jesus and read the stories in the bible, it shows that Jesus paid taxes. He gave to Caesar what was Caesars.

But he also spoke up against the Pharisees and the religious leaders.

Jesus described them as tying up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and laying them on the shoulders of others; while they themselves were unwilling to lift a finger to move them. He called them hypocrites, he told them that God would judge them for their actions.

Jesus drove money changers from the temple. He stood up against injustice.

And in Luke chapter 4 he described his call as

*to bring good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Now those sorts of things do involve standing up against people who are in positions of authority, rather than agreeing with what was happening.

And then when we look at the Old Testament,  
One of the big stories is about the freeing of the Israelites from being in slavery in Egypt. And that is a story of huge change. The Egyptians were in charge, they were the authorities, and God rescued the Israelites. They escaped.

And then time and time again in the scriptures there are prophets who spoke up against injustice.

Amos declared,  
*"let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)*

Those are words of God's justice, of God's righteousness, of God's heart being for the vulnerable.

And they were words that Martin Luther King Junior often used in speeches when he was working towards African Americans having equal rights in the United States.

So what does it all mean when we put all of these different voices, these different stories together?

Well over the centuries there have been followers of Jesus who have lived in just about every country in the world and who have had just about every different type of Government that there has ever been, there have been bad governments and good governments, democracies, monarchies, dictatorships everything we can imagine. And in all of these situations, there would have been followers of Jesus looking to the bible to help them to decide what to do.

And depending on the situation we are in, there are different things we can do.

We do know that no matter where we are and what situation we are in, that God is above human authorities.

It is God who we are ultimately responsible to. Jesus is our Lord.

We also know to stay far away from violent revolutions. They just don't seem to work. And as I have thought about it, whenever over history Christians have gotten mixed up with them they just seem to have ended in an awful mess.

We also know that God cares for the vulnerable. Sometimes governments don't do that well. The good ones do. The not so good ones tend to look after themselves and the people who are powerful.

So as followers of Jesus, as people who are becoming like Jesus, we too need to care for the vulnerable. We too need to speak up to those in authority, to walk alongside people. Using things that are available to us. In the last 100 years there have been many nonviolent protests around the world that have succeeded in bringing change.

We also need to be circumspect with what we hear and what we read. To be aware that we might not be hearing the whole truth. These days sometimes people call it spin. The particular slant or bias that people put on what they say, to make it more appealing. Often people in charge will have a set of values that are different to ours. People who write the stories that we read in the papers or watch on the news will do it with a particular angle or spin. Even if they don't do it intentionally. We need to be circumspect, to be aware that this is happening.

While I am not a total fan of Wikileaks some of the things that have come to light are really interesting. All of a sudden we get to read what people like Ambassadors really think and what they didn't want us to know.

We also need to stay inside the rules of the country we are in wherever possible.

- to pay our taxes, even if they do seem a little high.

- and to follow the laws that have been passed. That is what being a good citizen is about.

The exceptions to this are really rare.

And they are things like the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, or standing up against slavery in the United States, or not saying "Caesar is Lord". They do happen, but not very often.

In countries like New Zealand where we have a democracy, we can use the processes that there are to help shape the laws.

When the government makes laws or the Hastings District Council decide on policy they ask for submissions. They want to know what people think.

So we can tell them. They might not listen as much as we would like, but we do get the opportunity to talk with them and to influence them.

So we can use those processes.

And where we see people in authority not following the law, we can work to hold them accountable. That is what the laws are there for.

So that is the combination of voices, for us to balance, for us to be mindful of.

And as a community, as we show love for one another and love for God, as we follow those guidelines, society can be changed, it can be shaped.

That is what has happened throughout history.

That is why, even though those Roman Christians were killed because they would not say Caesar is Lord, more and more people through the Roman Empire became follower of Jesus, until it is estimated over half of the people in the Empire were followers of Jesus and things changed the whole empire and its rules changed forever.

That is why, the slave trade was abolished. Child labour laws were altered, Woman were given the vote.

Often changes like those started with groups no bigger than the number of people who are here today.

And as a community, as we show love for one another and love for God, as we follow those guidelines, society can be changed, it can be shaped.