

Don't Be a Jerk About It
Romans 13:1-7
7-19-2026

I have a confession to make.

It is that given the current extreme polarization and partisanship in our country today, and especially because we are in the midst of the political cycle, in 40 years of preaching, I don't think I have ever been as tempted to skip a passage as the one we are on this morning.

I realize that some may not like talking about it especially in church, but politics is something you cannot avoid in Romans 13.

I am talking about practice not policy, conduct not party, though it's not always easy to separate the two.

However, when policy intrudes on things like morality and justice and the treatment of people, if God's people remain silent then, what happens to our moral credibility.

How can we talk with credibility about the love of God for all people then?

That's what caused Bonhoeffer in his opposition to Hitler, William Wilburforce tireless work at ending slavery, Martin Luther King Jr. and his marches for civil rights, and Mother Teresa's work on behalf of the poorest of the poor in Calcutta.

Like the old saying goes, the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.

I was convicted of this as I read NT Wright and Michael Bird's recent book, Jesus and the Powers.

Actually, its full title is, Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies.

In it, these scholars, one from England and the other from Australia, they point out that because all authority originates with God, **part of the churches calling from the beginning has been, in the power of the Spirit, to speak the truth to power. Reminding those in power of their duties and responsibilities, especially when they step out of line.**

For God is God and will hold them to account

In other words, the church is to point out sin, even in our politics.

And there is a lot of sin in our politics and all the rhetoric surrounding it, on both the left and the right.

because all authority comes from and ultimately lies in Gods' hands, as Peter and the other Apostles told the authorities in Acts 5, whenever they are in conflict we must obey God not man

Far too often when it comes to religion and politics, people behave like the man in the cartoon that shows up at the pearly gates where he is met by Peter. As Peter greets him, he looks at his list and says, "Yes, I see that you were a believer, but you missed the DON'T BE A JERK ABOUT IT part."

Not just in society, but in the church, too many are being jerks about their politics, again, on both the left and the right:

- By spiritualizing and misusing God's name and His word to cause division and condemn others rather than to heal and bridge the divides which separate us. Paul told the Ephesians Jesus came to tear down the dividing walls of hostility in order to make us one. And Jesus' prayer in John 17 was that **we may be one just as he and the father are one. That means** regardless of party and voting record!
- By demonizing opponents instead of loving them, even though Jesus said we are to ***"Love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us."*** (Luke 6:27–28)
- And even those who are or do evil, we are not to be jerks about it with eye for an eye. But as Paul said here in verses 21 of chapter 12, we are not to overcome evil with more evil, **but to overcome it with good.**

Too many are being jerks

- By filling their language with scorn and derision, contempt and snide remarks about others and their views which may be contrary to their own.
- And by talking in absolutes, as if their side is good and the other evil, they are righteous and the other wicked, their answers and solutions to

problems and the world are all correct while the other side will lead to the destruction of our way of life.

In relation to politics, even in church, too often it seems that basic civility has been lost.

We need to tone down the rhetoric and regain the realization that our hope is not found in any politician or political party, on the right or left, because both are made up of fallen, sinful people in need of a savior, just as we do

there is only one source of hope and that is Jesus Christ.

Paul told the Galatians, may I never boast about anything, even our politics, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

When Paul began chapter 12 of Romans, he said we are to offer ourselves up as living sacrifices.

Sacrifice was something people of the first century would have been very familiar with, not just in the temple arena but in the political one as well.

In fact, the two often merged with sacrifices made to the emperor who was declared to be a god with temples built and sacrifices made in their honor

Life had little value to those in power and even fewer protections if you got on their wrong side.

Emperors were free to sacrifice people and take their lives or instigate persecution at will towards anyone or any group which offended them.

As Kenneth Boa put it, when he said offer yourselves as living sacrifices, Paul might as well have been saying, Live as though you have died for your faith. You might be dead soon anyway.

- When Paul wrote, Jesus had already been executed by the Roman authorities after being falsely accused by the Jewish authorities
- The apostle James had already been killed by Herod in Jerusalem
- The zealots were constantly trying to stir up trouble and insurrection against the Roman occupation

- the Romans considered Christianity to be merely a sect within Judaism.
- the Jews, and therefore guilt by association, Christians also, were considered stiff necked, hard to get along with or govern and to be rebellious
- Just a few years prior to his writing, the emperor Claudius had banished all Jews from Rome, which meant a good portion of Christians as well

Edward Blaiklock refers to them as the empires most difficult people.

- And just a few years after his writing, the Roman general Titus led the Roman legions against the walls of Jerusalem, completely destroying the city while killing over 1 million Jews in the process.

There was certainly no love lost towards those in authority.
Yet now Paul writes,

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” (Romans 13:1–7)

In spite of all their difficulties and in the face of often corrupt and hostile authorities who did misuse and abuse their power just as they do today, Paul says we are to submit to the governing authorities, be good citizens, because ultimately all authority comes from God.

And while Gods intent is wise and good rulers, even if they are not, in the end God will hold them to account.

So let everyone be subject to the governing authorities.

This doesn't mean we are therefore to agree or merely accept, that we can't oppose and work to change unjust laws and rulings, but we must do so in a way that is respectful of people and those in power

I do find it significant that after ending chapter 12 with instructions to bless those who persecute you in 12:14, to seek to live at harmony with one another in 12:16, to not repay evil for evil in verse 17, to seek to live at peace with everyone in verse 18, to not take revenge in verse 19, to feed and give drink to your enemy in verses 20, and seek to overcome evil with good in verse 21, immediately after this Paul says be subject to those in authority

His primary concern for writing seems to be, don't call down trouble on yourselves

Be good citizens and seek to live peacefully with those around you

It is important to notice not just what he says, but also what Paul doesn't say

- While he was growing up, the Roman emperor was Tiberius.

While he was one of Rome greatest generals, as an emperor, he left much to be desired and was extremely unpopular known for his cruelty and perversions.

He had an acrimonious relationship with the Roman Senate, became reclusive, and ended up withdrawing to the island of Capri, leaving the empire to run itself.

But Paul doesn't say to submit to those in authority only if you like them and their policies and think they are doing a good job or they are from the right party

- After Tiberius died, Caligula and Gemelius were appointed joint emperors.

Later, the Senate chose Caligula to be sole emperor and one of his first acts was to have Gemelius murdered

After 6 months in office, he suffered a serious illness after which he appeared to go insane.

He murdered most of his relatives, frequently had people tortured and killed while he ate, named his favorite horse as a counselor, declared himself a god, and had temples and sacrifices dedicated to himself.

He also created a riot in Jerusalem when he ordered that a statue in his honor be set up in the temple so the Jews could adore and worship him.

But Paul did not say submit only to those in authority who are good and wise and fair rulers that you support and voted for

- After the officers of his personal guard assassinated Caligula in 41 AD, Claudius became emperor.

He was the one who expelled all Jews from Rome.

He let his wife, Messalina, pretty much run the empire until he grew tired of her and had her murdered in 48 AD.

He then married his niece Agrippina who ended up poisoning him.

But Paul did not say submit only to those you respect who are honest and hold the same values as you.

- After Claudius came Nero who took the throne at age 15

At 22 he murdered his own mother followed 3 years later by the divorce and murder of his first wife.

It is believed that he is responsible for setting fire to Rome so he could embark on his own grand building project and he blamed the Christians as scapegoats.

His cruelty included the routine torture and execution of believers, often setting them on fire to use as human torches in public places.

He was the one who had both Peter and Paul executed in Rome.

And it was Nero who was emperor when Paul wrote these words without conditions or caveats, let everyone be subject to the governing authorities

He does not say that everything it does is good or right or ordained by God

But as scripture makes clear from the very beginning of creation, God values order

as NT Wright says, for no matter how bad tyranny is, anarchy is always worse.

His instruction is basically be good citizens

Don't be a jerk about it and be responsible for bringing the wrath of others down on the church, giving them reason to persecute and hate.

this passage has been twisted to say just that in an attempt to justify all sorts of evil, from slavery and apartheid to forcibly separating mothers from their children.

And it is almost always cited by those in power to condemn those who aren't.

Sadly, as we see in the alarming rise of Christian Nationalism, there is a strong temptation to seek a seat at the table and align with those in power.

Yet history has shown repeatedly, that whenever the church gets too cozy with those in power, claiming divine warrant and that God is on their side, in the long run God's work and His people suffer.

And quite often, the persecuted turn and become the persecutors.

But as Jesus told Pilate, His kingdom is not of this world.

It will not come through political power, but the love of the cross and evidenced in love for God and love for our neighbor, regardless of who they are

BUT the passage must not be taken or used as a blanket statement to simply accept whatever we are told.

To declare that Jesus is Lord was, **AND IS**, a political statement because if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not

it declares loyalty to a kingdom and greater authority than the one which happens to be in power at the moment

to submit doesn't mean to simply obey or accept, that we like or agree or don't work for change or speak out against injustice

in fact, because all authority originates with God, as the prophets especially show, if a policy or law or practice is wrong or unjust it requires us to obey God rather

than man and not remain passively silent but to speak out, vote against, and work to change them.

There is a note of hope underlying Paul's instructions here which were written during the reign of Nero.

That is because all authority is from God and he will hold those in power accountable, no matter how bad or even corrupt those in power may be, ultimately God is in control and is more than able to work all things towards his intended purpose.

The passage cannot be separated from its larger context and what Paul had said right before and will say right after it as if they had no bearing upon its meaning. The context determines its meaning.

And here, the larger context reveals that our politics and how we relate to those in authority must be done in an attitude of love and humility.

As one said, here Paul is exhorting the Roman believers to apply his previous commands toward love (12:9), harmony (12:16), and peace (12:18) in the context of obedience to government (13:1-5) seen by obeying laws and paying taxes to support the work of government. Which he then follows up with what he had started with in chapter 12, the need to always act in a manner consistent with love for one another which he reminds them in verse 10, is the fulfillment of the law

Some time back, John Ortberg wrote,

Imagine that we elected all the right people to all the right offices— president, Congress, governors, right down to school boards, city council members, and dog catcher.

Let's imagine that all these ideal office holders instituted all the right policies.

Let's imagine that we got all the right propositions and charter amendments right.

Every piece of legislation—from zoning laws to tax codes to immigration policy to crime bills—is just exactly the way you know it ought to be.

Would that usher in the Kingdom of God?

Would the hearts of the parents be turned toward their children?

Would all marriages be models of faithful love?

Would greed and pride be legislated out of existence?

Would human beings now at last be able to master our impulses in areas of sexuality and anger and narcissism?

Let's get a little personal.

Would you finally become the woman or man you know you ought to be?

In the words of theologian Macauley Culkin, I don't think so.

Because no human system has the ability to change the human heart.

Not even democracy, or capitalism, or post-modern-emergent-ancient-future-missionalism.

TS Elliot summed up our quandary brilliantly: We want a system of order so perfect that we do not have to be good.

Systems are important. But they're also complicated. Historian Mark Noll notes that evangelicals often fail to add value in politics because we like simplicity: good versus evil; right versus wrong; Political and economic arrangements are full of complexity and nuance. Well-intentioned legislation may lead to poor results.

When we condition people to think that every bill is a battle between the forces of righteousness versus the minions of darkness, we do not serve the process well.

We ought to be engaged in the political process. We ought to vote, be educated, be involved. AND WE NEED TO DO IT IN A WAY THAT IS CIVIL AND RESPECTFUL AND REDEMPTIVE.

In other words, don't be a jerk about it!