

INDEPENDENCE DAY, July 4, 2010

Romans 13:1-7 **GOD BLESS AMERICA WITH FAITHFUL SERVANTS**

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My fellow Americans,

If you had been living in the 1770's, in the days of the American Revolutionary War, which side would you have been on? Ever think about that? In my high school American history class at Wisconsin Lutheran we debated that very question. We had learned some of the reasons behind the colonists' uprising, things like taxation without representation which led to the Boston Tea Party. Or there was the notion that the companies in England were reaping all the financial and economic benefits without care or concern for the citizens on this side of the Atlantic. But as Christians who put God and his Word first in our lives, could we have rightly taken part in a concerted effort to overthrow the government and how does that affect our role as American citizens today?

Now, since we aren't living in those times and don't know all the details of what led to the rebellion, and because we are looking back through the glasses of nearly 250 years of history, it is likely we don't have the clearest of pictures on which to base our decision. But the words before us today would make us look long and hard at whether we would have supported the cause or not. I say that because the apostle Paul, speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says some strong things about a Christian's duty toward those in authority. He also has some clear words for those who are in positions of authority in government. On this day/ weekend where we again celebrate our national day of independence, let's examine these things using the theme:

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servants who are faithful in carrying out the duties of government, as well as servants who are faithful in obeying God's representatives.

I.

When Martin Luther wrote an explanation to the fourth of God's Ten Commandments, he included the idea that we Christians are not just to honor our parents, but also those whom God has placed over us in other positions of authority. He referred to them as God's representatives and wrote that they are over us in the family, in the church and in society in general. The Bible teaches that God uses these representatives to provide us with some wonderful blessings, both physical and spiritual. On this day which marks the 234<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence we want to review the principles which guide us as Christian citizens. This whole issue of a Christian's role as both a citizen of God's kingdom and of the particular earthly country in which they live, that's what Paul is addressing here, just as Jesus did in our gospel reading for today.

Paul says it very clearly and succinctly, **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.** Notice what he is saying, and this is the heart of the matter, that no matter what kind of government is functioning in a country, it is in place with God's permission and its authority comes from God. Whether it's a theocracy, as OT Israel was for several centuries, ruled by God himself through the judges and prophets, or whether it's ruled by a single individual such as a king or queen or even a dictator, whether it's a democracy or a republic, whether it's a government you like or not, they are all established by God. Now, I don't want to get into the debate of why God allows certain kinds of government or certain rulers to come to

power, especially those that are evil and corrupt and do great damage to their people and to the other nations of the world. The point here is that every government is acting as God's secular representative and that they derive their authority from him. It also means that government, those who have been given this authority by God, whether they realize that or not, that they will have to answer to God on how they use that authority, whether they serve as president of the United States or patrol officer walking his beat.

That duty, Paul says here, is to do you good, that is, to see to the physical welfare of its citizens, to provide peace and security. And the way government does that is through the use of law. The role of government is to formulate laws that are in the best interest of its people and then uphold the law. Because it is a secular institution, separate from the church, the government is to follow the natural law as it is written in the heart of man, as well as following the dictates of human reason, experience and common sense. At times this may involve passing laws that do not reflect the high standards of God's law. An example of that is when Moses permitted divorce among the Israelites because of the hardness of sinful hearts, even though it clearly went against God's standards for marriage in the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. Thankfully, under our government we can participate in the making of those laws and can use our influence to pass laws that more closely follow God's moral law. That will always be to our advantage as Christians.

So our prayer today and always is that God bless our country with servants who continue to use their God-given authority for the good of her citizens. In protecting us and our nation that means government has the right from God to punish the wrongdoer, as Paul explains here. That is how it provides peace and security. Without that threat of punishment from government, where would society end up? Only chaos and evil and violence would result. So, when you see that police car rolling down the street, that's government in action. If you are acting according to the laws of the land, you have nothing to be afraid of.

It's only when you go against those laws that we have to be afraid. Then the government has the right from God to punish those who do wrong. Paul says here, **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.** I get a twinge of that fear whenever I'm driving down the highway and catch a glimpse of the sheriff parked along the side of the road. There's that quick glance down at the speedometer to see how fast I was going. That threat of punishment causes me to keep my actions within the dictates of the law.

That punishment can even go so far as to cut short another person's life in this world. When Paul talks about government using the sword, he's saying that government can go to great lengths to preserve law and order, peace and stability, including the use of what we call capital punishment. Now, these words are not a command that a government must use the ultimate threat of punishment. But God in his word shows that he is not opposed to that drastic a measure if the government deems it necessary in order to carry out its duty of providing peace and security. And that would include inflicting similar punishment on a nation and its people if there is a direct threat to our nation or to other nations who might not be able to defend themselves. For example, I believe our country was fully justified in participating in the world wars and in the Persian Gulf War, or even in today's wars against terrorism. We were and are fighting against enemies whose goal is to destroy our society and our country, and in some cases even to destroy us because of our particular religious beliefs as Christians. So, may God bless his servants in government with wisdom to make laws that reflect God's will as to what is right and wrong. May he bless our leaders with courage and strength to do all that is necessary to maintain peace and security. May he continue to bless our country where we have such precious freedoms that other people around the world only dream of having. And may he bless us as citizens, keeping us faithful in our obedience to his authority in the government.

When Paul says that we as Christians are to submit to the governing authorities, he uses a word that is rather frequent in the New Testament. It's the word that is used in connection with our Savior Jesus, that he submitted to the will of his heavenly Father, humbling himself by coming into this world, sacrificing himself on the cross to free us from our sins. It's a word that involves two ideas, willingness and sacrifice, for the good of others, for the carrying out of a plan. In secular Greek it's the attitude a soldier has who is part of the army, putting himself under the authority of his commander for the good of the outfit, for the good of the nation. It's also the word that is used for us Christians as we willingly submit to our Savior. We see his love at work in our lives, rescuing us so that we can be part of his heavenly family, forgiving us all our sins and then giving us the strength and the desire to use our lives in service to him. We submit to him out of love and gratitude for all that he's done for us.

So when Paul calls on us Christians to submit to the governing authority God has placed over us, we do because of our relationship with our Savior. We obey, he says, **not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience.** It is an expression of our faith in Jesus, recognizing government as his established representative who is to serve for our good. We will pay our taxes because that is the God-pleasing thing to do, in gratitude for the blessings and benefits that certainly do come our way through the government. Now, that doesn't mean we have to pay more than is required, and we can work within the framework of our system to control our taxes.

Thus, we will support our government in whatever ways we can. Above all, we will give honor and respect to those in authority, even if we don't always agree with the policies and programs that may be in place at the time. The only time we could disobey with a clear conscience is if the government gives us commands that directly contradict God's word or if it forbids us from doing things that God clearly wants us to be doing. His law is our supreme law. Here in America we as Christian citizens can peacefully exercise our rights and privileges to affect our government, remembering that we have a God to whom we must give answer for our actions. And we can exercise our freedom to pray and worship and to express our beliefs in public, and especially to proclaim the good news about Jesus in our community and in our nation. Again, that is something that can't be done in many places in our world. For all these reasons, let all of us be faithful in obeying those in authority in government, remembering that we do so out of love for our Savior and the blessings he gives us through the government.

I may have had a hard time justifying fighting on the side of the colonists in the war for independence. And I am sometimes worried about various actions of our government which directly contradict the Bible. But, as Paul says here, both those in positions of authority and those under authority are accountable to God for our actions. I encourage you to daily thank God for the freedoms we enjoy as Americans and as Christians. Seek God's forgiveness for those times we take those blessings for granted or for the times when we disobey his authorities. May he continue to bless us and our nation so that he word can be proclaimed in our midst and so that we can live our lives according to it. AMEN.