

# PASSAGES I LOVE TO HATE: “LET EVERY PERSON BE SUBJECT TO THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES”

Romans 13:1-10

*Third in the sermon series “Passages I Love to Hate”*

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## **Prayer**

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,*

*Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;*

*Thou who hast by Thy might led us into the light*

*Keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

*And may the words of mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight*

*O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.*

*(From “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” James Weldon Johnson)*

## **Romans 13:1-10**

**1** 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. **2** Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3** 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; **4** 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. **5** Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. **6** For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. **7** Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. **8** Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9** The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." **10** Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

# Paul Bridges

is a slow-talking middle aged man (58-year-olds are still middle aged, aren't they?) with a South Georgian drawl. He defines himself as a conservative Republican who is also a Christian, and is the mayor of the great metropolis of Uvalda, Georgia, population 600. And he has been breaking the law, or at least the law that was recently passed by the Georgia state legislature that declared that anyone who willingly gave a ride to an undocumented foreigner would be breaking the law. He does that all the time as he teaches English as a second language and hosts onion workers in his home and helps them cash checks every other Friday at the convenience store, translating for them.. He has been called an "evil American" and a communist which I thought went out with the ending of the Cold War, and his own brother-in-law has turned against him, turning away and refusing to shake hands with one of Paul's friends, who happened to be Hispanic. He probably won't get re-elected.

Doesn't he know that he is not only breaking the state law, but is also going against the Bible? I mean, you heard it when I read Paul's letter to the church at Rome a little while ago. It is very clear and unequivocal: *"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."*

These words hardly seem likely from a man who had written the church at Corinth that their citizenship was not of this world but of a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God, so much so that the followers of Jesus would rather die than renounce their faith in favor of worshipping the emperor. Paul had experienced the wrath of Roman governmental power, and probably had a pretty good sense that he would eventually be arrested and put to death at the hands of Emperor Nero.

And it might not seem like a "passage I love to hate," because we live in a country that is blessed with the freedom to worship, the freedom to assemble, the freedom to speak, and even the freedom to protest.

But this is a passage that has been horribly misused through the ages by some who called themselves Christians. In the 1930s the German Christian church quoted this in order to justify their claim that allegiance was owed to Adolf Hitler. And it is a passage that we have to go through whenever we feel that our liberties, or the liberties of those who don't have a voice, who are "the least of these," feel threatened by the governing authorities.

Now, if we were to continue on in the story of scripture, we discover that Romans 13 is countered by John's vision of governmental power in Revelation 13, a vision in which that power is portrayed as a beast, an evil power that is at odds with the will of God. So who is right, Paul or that prophet on Patmos who comes later in the story and scares our pants off?

Which is more authoritative, Romans 13 or Revelation 13? Governing authorities as instituted by God, or governing authorities as the evil beast?

As in all difficult texts, it helps to understand the situation Paul was in while addressing the church at Rome. He was trying to help a church rebuild after having been cast out of the city by Claudius because of riots in the streets between Jews and Christians. Even though Christianity had been a Jewish movement, in Rome Judaism was becoming more nationalistic and revolutionary, with Jewish Zealots arguing for the overthrow of the government. These tensions were finding their way into the church as Gentiles and Jews argued over the proper way to think about the Roman empire.

Paul had just finished writing, in Romans 12, about the unity of the body of Christ, and how that was paramount, and that love must be at the center of Christian life and practice. Yes, the empire was oppressive and corrupt. But no matter how corrupt, the Kingdom's call to love and serve reigned supreme. So Paul counseled the church at Rome to avoid these entanglements, choosing instead to submit to the authorities in the pursuit of love and unity.

As he always did, Paul offered a justification for this suggestion. As a good Jew and a man of his times, it was the appeal to order, recognizing that to have NO authorities in society leads to anarchy. He was a man who believed in the proper order of things (he had to have a streak of Presbyterianism in him!), and so it made sense that government as an institution had been ordained by God to provide order to our world.

He knew his scriptures, and believed that Saul and David were anointed by God to serve God's purposes. Even foreign leaders could be used by God — as was Cyrus of Persia, when he overthrew the Babylonian Empire and allowed the Israelites to return home to Jerusalem.

This order in Romans doesn't speak to the justice or injustice of any governmental structure. For instance, he did not talk about Nero's policies or his corruption, rather he addresses a belief that all communities, be they the church or a city/state, require some sort of structure, some sort of governing authority and that these authorities should be treated with respect as ordained by God.

But Paul did not stop there. Even though authority must be respected and order maintained, it is clear from the rest of his letter that love is the guiding principle upon which our lives and relations must be built, and that organizations and authorities which harm and oppress others may be called into account. He had an idealized view of authority and government here, but he also knew that we live in a world in which that ideal was rarely reached due to the prevalence of sin and brokenness in the world. The fact is that governments (like all institutions) are staffed by sinful people, in need of grace, and that they often make bad judgments and faulty decisions through their weaknesses. Always have, always will.

And we are a prideful people who often think that we know much better what to do than God does, so we strike off on our own, or we drum up the masses, and do things that harm others. And in some cases, governments are overwhelmed by persons who are oppressive and perpetuate evil in their sinful pursuit of power and money. Those situations are far removed from the ideal Paul describes.

Through the centuries people of faith have struggled with this. Perhaps the most famous Christian over the past century faced this dilemma was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was confronted with evil at its worst in the person of Adolph Hitler, and he struggled to make sense of the call to submit with the call to love, the call to humility with the confronting of evil. Eventually Bonhoeffer decided that the evil was too great and that Hitler must be killed, however he recognized that act as outside the ideal will of God and something that he would be responsible for throughout the rest of his life. Even in the face of evil, Bonhoeffer recognized that the ultimate goal of the follower of Jesus is the pursuit of love, justice and righteousness.

Martin Luther King Jr. went through a similar dilemma in facing folks like Bull Conner in Birmingham, but he chose another way. While he challenged the governmental structures, calling those in power to account for their injustice, he did so in a way that upheld the call to love, honor and humility. He knew that he was breaking laws made by humans, but believed that he was following a high law of love and justice.

What it boils down to — and I know this sounds simplistic, but there can be truth in simplicity — is that love must be at the heart of everything we do. It was true in Micah's day 600 years before Christ, when he reminded us that God requires us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. It was true in Jesus day, who reminded us of the two great commandments: to love God and to love neighbor as ourselves. And it is true today, to know that love is at the center of it all, and the love of God is above all others loves, including country and family. Whereas love of country is a wonderful thing, but as Pablo Casals once asked, "why should that love stop at our borders." Because God is God, and not just Lord of the church (as German Christians affirmed) but, as John Calvin stated, Lord of the world and of the nations of the world. We are not just a "nation under God," but a world under God.

The call to love guides us even in our political dealings. Yes, we are cynical today, not quite trusting of our political authorities due to years of power misused, but we still love them, wish the best for them, and pray for them to do the right thing.

There was an incident in the White House a few years back that might give us some guidance. A delegation of religious leaders met with President Kennedy to express their concern about the actions he was initiating in Southeast Asia. Quickly into the conversation they realized that his mind was already made up, but they also realized that he had already thoroughly considered their position, though he rejected it. And so one of the clergymen said "Mr. President, I can see you have made your decision, aware of the objection we have brought. Now, what can we do to help you be understood by the American people?"

Of course the President coveted their support, but he responded, “Perhaps you should do nothing. The function of religion is not to sanction the actions of the president, but to submit them to critical review.” And at that moment the Catholic president revealed a profounder understanding of Christian citizenship from a Reformed perspective than the clergyman who asked the question. The long historic role of Christian citizenship from our Reformed/Presbyterian perspective is that of critic, but always the loving critic; submitting every law, every regulation, legislative act, administrative policy and judicial pronouncement to the scrutiny of those sweeping and moral imperative and prohibitions of our faith; applauding what is consistent, protesting what is contradictory, and always willing to engage in civil and serious moral discourses in areas of disagreement. But most importantly, always with love at the center.

When Paul Bridges was asked why he was breaking the law, he simply said “They’re my family.” Would that all proposed laws and regulations begin with that statement: “They’re in my family, the family of God.”

I, for one, am thankful that some of our nation’s forebears went “against the Bible” when they chose to disobey governmental authorities and obey a higher authority, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence:

“... endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

So this weekend may we remember who we are, and how we are blessed here — to be free to choose to obey the author of our liberty:

“To Thee we sing:  
Long may our land be bright  
With freedom’s holy light.  
Protect us by thy might,  
Great God, our King.”

Amen.

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