

God and/or the Emperor

Romans 13:1-7

Revelation 13:11-18

Series: Tough Texts of the Bible

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¹Let 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. ²Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For 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; ⁴for 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. ⁵Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷Pay 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. (Romans 13:1-7)

¹¹Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹²It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. ¹³It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; ¹⁴and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; ¹⁵and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six. (other ancient authorities read six hundred sixteen) (Revelation 13:11-18)

When I was serving my first church, I got to know some of the veterans down at the V.F.W. One of them asked if we could do a special service on a Sunday morning. The purpose would be to remember all the war veterans of our community. The elders and I thought that would be a good idea. It was a way to affirm them for service to their country, and signal that our church cared about their generation.

I can't remember what time of year it was. Possibly it was connected to some national holiday, like Memorial Day or the Fourth of July. What I will remember is how awkward it was to have a group of about thirty middle-aged visitors show up that Sunday, most of them in old military uniforms that were a little tight around the middle.

I'll say this much: it was a dedicated group of men who showed up that Sunday. A little ruffled, yet still dedicated. And much to our surprise the whole group marched in during the first hymn, with one man carrying an American flag. That's not usually how we began a church service. But it was a special occasion, both for them and for us.

The really awkward moment came as the opening hymn concluded. The commander of the group stood up, took off his hat, put his hand over heart, and started leading the congregation in the words, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America..." Some of the congregation started in on the pledge, even though it was unscripted from the bulletin. Some others stood there, looking slightly bewildered, as if they

weren't sure that this was the time or place to salute the flag and say the pledge. Meanwhile a handful of others turned pale and murmured, "Just wait until the next session meeting."

A week or so later, the next session meeting came. The elders had an unusually orderly meeting. And then somebody said, "So why in the world did we let those people lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance on a Sunday morning?"

Somebody else said, "What's the matter with that? Aren't you patriotic?"

"Of course I'm patriotic," said the first. "Few people are as patriotic as me. But patriotism doesn't belong in a Christian sanctuary on a Sunday morning. We come to worship God, not the country."

"Wait just a minute," somebody else said. "This country is a gift to us by God. God gave us this country to take from the Indians, so that we could live in freedom and democracy. I don't have any problems with the pledge in worship."

"Well, I do," said the town librarian. "We are baptized as Christians, not as Americans. The Gospel of Jesus Christ came to our shore by preachers and missionaries, and it's our responsibility to proclaim the Good News to every nation under heaven. There's nothing special in the Bible about being American. God loves every person of every nation."

The conversation continued like that, probably for another half-hour or so. I didn't think that I needed to shut it down. It was a good and healthy debate about the relationship between church and state, between Christ and government. It was just as divided and inflammatory as any other community conversation about church and state. And anybody who thinks that the Bible doesn't talk about politics should open up the book and give it another look.

Since today is both the Lord's Day and the Fourth of July, I didn't need to look very hard to find a Bible text to keep the conversation going. Actually I found two texts. Both of them from the New Testament. Each of them discuss the issue in very different terms.

On the one hand, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome in the middle of the first century. Those people live in the shadow of Caesar, and Paul says, "Do whatever the emperor tells you. Don't resist his authority, for God has put him on the throne. So pay your taxes and give him some respect."

On the other hand, John has a vision where he sees the reality of ultimate evil. It's a great beast, he says, and it has a number. Most of the ancient manuscripts calculate the number as 666. According to the footnotes, a handful of the ancient manuscripts read 616. The number 666 (the imperfect number of six, three times) has often been assigned by Bible-hunters to all kinds of evil mongers through the centuries, to people like Adolf Hitler, Genghis Khan, and Oliver North. But as Dr. Bruce Metzger taught us in seminary, the best explanation is quite simple. Take the name "Nero," one of the most notorious Roman emperors. In Greek and Hebrew, each letter of a name had a numerical value. Add up the numerical value of Nero's name and you get 666. And if you take the spelling variation of his name, it adds up to 616.¹ Voila! The emperor is the great beast.

These are the two extremes of how Christians can understand the governments of their nations. Either "do whatever the emperor tells you because God has put him there" or "the emperor is Satan in the flesh."

Historically, these two texts were written no more than about thirty years apart. They were written by different people in different situations within the same empire. We can expect there were some historical circumstances that conditioned the tone of each text. In the first, Paul the apostle is writing to Christians in

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 76.

Rome. Probably in an effort to extend the graciousness of the Gospel, possibly as a way of greasing the skids for further evangelism, Paul speaks favorably of the Roman emperor. “Do whatever he tells you.”

John, however, has been sent as a political prisoner to a dusty little island in the middle of the ocean. He has nothing to prove, and nothing to lose. Throughout this section of the book of Revelation, John speaks rather unfavorably of the Caesar of that time. He recognizes the power of the world’s remaining empire, and he sees rather clearly that the whole system is bent on prosperity by control. It’s like a beast with ten horns, to represent complete power. It speaks bold, proud words which compete for God’s authority and deceive the people. And John uses veiled language to help people see the seductive danger of the empire in which they live, and provide the tools for living a Christian life in a society that is about another business.

It’s very interesting that the Bible should have such different views about the relationship Christians and their countries. No doubt we will tend to read these texts through American glasses, even though they weren’t originally addressed to us. Our views of whoever is in power will probably shape what we see and what we’re able to hear. But let me suggest a couple of things for us to think about, as we celebrate this secular holiday and move toward the Lord’s Table.

The first is this: the primary role of the church is to make Christians. That is, we baptize people in the name of the Triune God, and then we train them to worship and serve this God before they serve anybody and anything else. That’s our job: to make Christian disciples who are capable of hearing Jesus, living in his light, and loving the same people whom he loves. That’s not the government’s job. That’s not the public school’s job. That’s not the shopping mall’s job. That is our job. And if the church doesn’t make Christians, we can’t expect anybody out there is to make them for us.

As someone notes, “Men and women are so constituted as to worship some absolute power, and if they do not worship the true and real Power behind the universe, they will construct a god for themselves and give allegiance. It is always a choice between the power that operates through inflicting suffering, that is the power of beast, and the power that operates through accepting suffering, namely, the power of the Lamb.”² Revelation 13 reminds us that there are governments and other dominions that are always going to compete for God’s authority. They are always going to try to snatch the authority that rightly belongs to God. The power of sin is so destructive that it will take good people and good institutions and twist them in upon themselves.

For what it’s worth, this insight was not lost on James Madison, the primary author of the American constitution. Madison studied at the College of New Jersey, now called Princeton University. One of his teachers was a Presbyterian minister by the name of John Witherspoon. Witherspoon taught him, “Don’t give absolute power to anybody, for it will corrupt them.” So when Madison framed the Constitution, he built in a system of checks and balances, so that no single branch of the American government would have absolute power over the others.³ It was a Presbyterian contribution to political theory; namely, because of sin, don’t completely trust any person in authority. The same urges that twist the human heart from good to evil are the urges that must be balanced in power.

And the church needs to love God so clearly that we learn to discern what is evil and what is good. What is beautiful and true? What is ugly and destructive, and to be avoided? With the mind of Christ, that’s what the church must teach us to see.

If it is the church’s role to make Christians, it is the government’s role to establish justice. Biblically speaking, justice comes when there is fairness all around, and where all members of a society have the same access to the society’s goods and services. The Old Testament prophets thundered about this kind of justice. A quick case can also be made that Jesus was equally concerned with the Kingdom’s economics. As Paul goes on

² Ibid, 77.

³ As told by Martin Marty at Muhlenberg College, on the bicentennial observance of the U.S. Constitution (1987).

to say in Romans 13, “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments... are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Thinking about Romans 13, this is why God establishes the governing authorities: so that God’s will would be done in public life. A Christian view of government is not driven by selfishness or need. Rather it’s based in the understanding that the good society is the society that pursues the greatest good. What is most beneficial for the largest group of people? Not merely for the richest, or the slickest, or the one born with the silver spoon – but for the widest possible group of people.

Permit me, if you will, a rant or two. One of our national sports these days is good old-fashioned greed. No wonder that greed is the distinguishing factor of most of our national sports heroes; those people are simply living out what we would do if we got the winning ticket of the Mega Millions lottery. Once upon a time, the American Dream meant you could work hard and gain a good life for your loved ones. These days the Dream has been distorted, so that the new dream is to make enough money that you don’t have to deal with your neighbors. These days you can’t run for public office unless you’re a multi-millionaire. You can’t stay in office unless you take money from people who want something from you.

Whatever happened to that wonderful word “commonwealth”? Whatever happened to the basic human insight that what’s best for me is ultimately what’s best for you, and what’s best for the strangers at the gate? We continue to fight terrorism by angering the terrorists. While people elsewhere in the world are starving, we pay some of our farmers not to raise any crops. We trivialize goodness and mercy, and refuse to make any meaningful sacrifices that will improve the lives of those who come after us.

And one critic has likened our the past thirty years of our national life to an SUV that’s barreling out of control toward a cliff; we all know it’s going to crash someday, but we don’t know when. So we keep the pedal to the metal, go as fast as we can, and grab as much as we’re able.

A good government brings these things to public attention before they become a wider crisis. A government that is established by God will not plunder the people for the benefit of the few. A good government is going to do God’s work, without needing to do it in a specifically religious or sectarian manner. It does justice. It programs mercy. It preaches self-restraint. It encourages discipline. A good government always takes care of the neighborhood.

Today is Sunday, the Lord’s Day. And today is the Fourth of July. Regardless of the date on the calendar, we always live somewhere between Romans 13 and Revelation 13. And it’s a good idea to pay attention to the conversation that arises between these two different texts. God has given us a government, not that we pledge it our absolute obedience, but that we receive it as a gift, and see it as a means of divine grace.

And regardless of nationality, God has adopted us into the church, an unusual family of faith where people of every nation are invited to follow after Jesus Christ, the Lord of Lords, and King of Kings.

On the day when Jesus was revealed in his baptism, God quoted the psalm that we are about to sing. Psalm 2 declares that the righteous ruler is the child of God. The One who rules the heavens will laugh at human scheming. God warns those who chase after other sources of joy. God alone is worthy of our prayer and devotion. And God will not rest until “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Christ.”⁴

⁴ Revelation 11:15