

Citizenship

Romans 13:1-7 and Various Passages

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(GA) If we polled everyone in this room, I'm sure we'd find about 150 different opinions about our government and what we want from it.

A. That's why I'm so impressed when someone can find common ground for us.

1. Joel Belz wrote an article for *World Magazine* in 2006 titled, "Tender Toughness." Belz writes, "People want to be lightly governed by strong governments."

That's what you've wanted since you were a small child. You wanted your dad to be big and strong and able to do anything you could think of—except that, when he dealt with you, it had to be with gentleness and tenderness. You wanted a policeman on the corner tough enough to handle any neighborhood bully, but who would also hoist you to his shoulders and help you find your parents when you got lost in the crowd.

Lots of muscle; lots of restraint. There's an innate yearning in almost all of us for that rare combination. When evil people rise up, we want a government with the clout to back them down. Yet we never want that clout turned on us.¹

(SN) I think Joel Belz may have found the **one** piece of common ground for most of us. Now, how it all should look and who we should vote for – that's a different matter.

A. Even among Christians, there are strong differences of opinion on how to be a follower of Jesus and an American citizen.

1. During the presidential election in 2004, between George Bush and John Kerry, two Christians from the University of North Carolina debated the question, "Who would Jesus vote for?"

a. **Only in America** reported on this debate, "Jesus didn't reveal how he would vote, but we can be sure how he felt about the debate. When the exchange became heated, one of the combatants slapped the other in the face. His opponent fell to the concrete patio, suffering a head injury."²

2. This moment sort of summarizes the ethos of politics in America, doesn't it? Sadly, even among Christians.

B. The series that we're in right now, "God & You," is looking at how God providentially cares and directs His creation... often through us.

1. The governments of our land are certainly one of the ways God accomplishes what He desires for His creation.

a. We find God's protection... God's provision... even God's judgment and punishment of sin being worked out through our governments.

¹ Joel Belz, "Tender Toughness," © *World magazine* (7-22-06), p. 3

² "Only in America," *The Week* (10-15-04) p. 6

i. *Romans 13* refers to governmental authority as “God’s servant, and avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

2. God works through governments – and as Christians, we’re a part of this work – so I’d like to explore for a bit our role as Christians living as citizens in America.

(S) As we get going, there is one truth that hangs like an awning over the doorway of any discussion we’d have on politics or citizenship. It frames our discussion.

A. It’s the truth that you and I – if we’ve trusted in Jesus for our salvation – are first and supremely citizens of heaven, or the kingdom of God.

1. *Philippians 3:20* tells us, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

a. We live on earth, in America, but we’re carrying Green Cards. As the Apostle Peter says, we’re aliens of this world.

2. Friends, aliens feel awkward – there’s an inherent tension for someone who is a citizen someplace, living someplace else.

a. You may have seen the movie *Terminal* with Tom Hanks.³

i. Tom Hanks plays a guy named Victor Navorski. Victor arrives at JFK airport in New York, but because of something that happened in his home country, Krakozia, he is denied a visa to anywhere.

a) Victor can’t go anywhere, he can’t do anything. He doesn’t understand the culture or language, so he’s confused. He’s confined to space and rules that other people have determined.

b. The *Terminal* is a hard movie to watch because it’s two hours of watching someone go through painfully awkward situations because he’s a citizen of one country, forced to stay in another.

3. That same painful awkwardness is here for us as followers of Jesus living in America.

a. We have a different King – our highest allegiance isn’t to the President, it’s to Jesus.

b. We’re most concerned about obeying the laws of Jesus’ kingdom, as this book describes them.

c. And we care more about Jesus’ fame, then our nation’s or our president’s.

4. These allegiances to Jesus and His kingdom can make it pretty tricky to navigate the waters down here... in America.

a. Many of us who love Jesus and want to do the right thing struggle with what that right thing is.

i. What role should I play in politics? What role should the church play?

ii. Who should I vote for... and if the other person is elected, how do I walk with Jesus under an authority that I disagree with?

iii. As a pastor – and a patriotic one – I’ve struggled with the question of how much to celebrate our nation, our flag, in church.

5. We need to show a lot of grace to each other, because these are all difficult, awkward questions, because we are citizens of heaven living as aliens in a foreign land.

B. But we can’t just not talk about this. Not talking about our citizenship together as a church isn’t being faithful. Our King expects us to participate and engage our earthly country.

1. In *1 Peter 2:13*, our King tells us to: “Be subject *for the Lord’s sake* to every human institution.”

³Terminal. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Tom Hanks. Dreamworks, 2004.

- a. As an act of loyalty, or faithfulness, to Jesus we must place ourselves under the leadership, or governing, of our authorities. Being subject demands our decisions and actions as a citizen.

C. How do we do this, though? That's the question, right? How to we remain faithful to our King while we live here in America?

1. How do we submit to our authority... while loving justice, doing mercy, and praying and working to see the things on earth become as they are in heaven?

- a. These are some of the waters that I'm trying, somewhat awkwardly, to navigate as a Christian citizen in America.

D. I'd like us to look at a passage that gives us a couple answers to this question – Romans 13:1-7.

Read Romans 13:1-7

1. As we think about our government, or those who are in authority over us, we must keep one thing in mind: God has put them there.

- a. *Verse 1* says, “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

- i. *Verse 2* tells us that if we resist our authorities – our president, our laws, our state and local officials, we're resisting something that God has done. Let that sink in, friends.

- b. This is an incredible truth. Think of what this means:

- i. It doesn't matter what political party is in office... God put them there for His purposes.

- ii. It doesn't matter what human process elected or appointed that leader – whether it happened democratically, or by a dictator... whether all the votes were counted, or whether the hanging chads determined the election... God instituted the leaders of our nation... or our state... or our town.

- iii. It doesn't matter if the leader appears to be doing good things – things that closely align with God's law, or they're doing wicked things... God has put them there.

- a) The government in place when Paul wrote these words – the Roman Empire – was just wicked, at times.

- i) They instituted human fights to the death as entertainment.

- ii) They slaughtered people in public places because of jealousy, or family rivalries. Christians were tortured and killed because they claimed to have a King more important than Caesar.

- a. It was a brutal empire. Yet, God put it in place.

- a) Do you remember what Jesus said to Pilate, when Jesus was handed over to Pilate for sentencing? Jesus said in *John 19:11* – “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

2. It doesn't matter who is leading... how they got there... and what they're doing with their leadership – “no authority exists but what God has instituted” and if we resist our government and our political leaders and officials, we're resisting God.

- a. Do we do this? Do we resist God by resisting our governing authorities?

- i. I probably receive five emails a week – forwards from people – that are making fun of our president. Some are just virulent, poisonous. Attacking his race... or his citizenship...

a) I get so sad when I think of how the non-Christians in America must look at the Christians, when they see us attack our president through words... emails... in sermons.

ii. If this isn't active resistance, defiance, I don't know what is.

a) This passage says to "pay respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed" – certainly our president, our governor, our local officials and enforcement officers deserve our respect and honor simply because they hold a position of respect and honor that God has given them.

3. We have to dig down deep – tap into our sense of obligation to Jesus – sometimes in order to honor and submit to those in political authority that we don't agree with...

a. ...but that's exactly what Jesus commands us to do when He says in *1 Peter 2:13*, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors."

i. He's saying, "Dig down, bite your tongue, don't participate in the rebellious spirit – the anti-authority-times in which we live.

a) "For my sake, as your King, submit to & respect your authorities."

E. Now this raises another set of questions, though, doesn't it? Another way that it is awkward to live as Christians in America is that we do love truth... we do love righteousness... and when we see truth and righteousness getting trounced on by our human systems and leaders it's tough.

1. (Examples of unrighteousness in policy)

a. My heart breaks for the millions of preborn children who are killed in our country each year, legally... because our lawmakers and our leaders legislated for this right.

b. It makes me sad to see our political leaders promote homosexuality as a loving, pleasing arrangement in the eyes of God.

c. It makes me very uncomfortable to see our nation kill human embryos and say we're doing it for the sake of advancing human life.

i. Personhood begins at conception – we are destroying people when we "harvest" embryos.

2. These are all activities that our government promotes, or works towards, in some respect, and for someone who loves Jesus and is trying to live according to His purposes, I struggle with what I see.

a. And I struggle with what it looks like to "not resist my authority," yet remain faithful to my King on these issues and more.

F. I do find help in *Romans 13* again. If you look at *verses 3-4*, you see that there is a good and an evil. There is right and wrong. And our leaders don't define it. *Read 3-4 again.*

1. This right and wrong, good and evil, is a reality that is ABOVE nations and rulers and presidents and kings. Paul says here that rulers enforce this right and wrong, but it's God's definition or will that they are enforcing, right? According to this passage – God defines right and wrong... whether the leaders get it right or not ... there is an objective morality defined by the person of God.

a. This means that our current president doesn't determine right and wrong any more than our former 43.

b. This means that as our laws are amended, and new laws are added to our local or national constitutions, they don't modify or change objective morality in any way.

2. What this means for us as Christians, people who live first and foremost for Jesus, is that we live our lives according to the morality God sets in place.

- a. Our allegiance is to God’s laws first... and if our human laws directly contradict God’s moral law, we:
 - i. Remain faithful to Jesus...
 - ii. And we do what He calls us to do to bring about change.
- 3. And this is where we have much to celebrate about living in America. We’ve established a constitution together that specifies that we are a government of the people, by the people, for the people.
 - a. As citizens, then, we get to play a part. What an awesome gift, or outlet, that God has given us as citizens of America, that many Christians living in other place or times haven’t had.
 - i. We get to vote and elect our leaders that we feel will best advance heaven’s interests – objective morality – on earth.
 - a) Or, in the case of some of us, perhaps... we’ve been the elected ones. We’ve been the ones to be instituted by God through the choice of people.
 - ii. We get to call our senators or congressmen and influence opinion on laws and legislation.
 - iii. We get to take action, or stand against, wicked things that happen because we do have freedom of voice in this country.
- 4. As Gene Edward Veith Jr says, we are “both subjects and rulers”⁴ in this great nation.
 - a. What a gift! What a gift to have so much opportunity to work for what God defines as good and right.

(VR) We just need to interact with our leaders and our laws with the character of Christ.

A. That doesn’t remove the inherent awkwardness. It doesn’t mean that you and I will have all the same convictions or opinions about politics and involvement in this nation. We won’t.

1. It does mean that we have the same mandate – same priority: We are to interact as Christians citizens in a Christlike way – being as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves as we work and pray for the things of heaven.

B. One of the great men who did just this within the realm of politics is William Wilberforce. In the middle of the 18th century, Christians in England became convicted that the slave trade was not good... not right, according to God’s moral law.

1. Christians prayed... Christians preached in their churches against it... and these were good, important steps. But they needed to do more – they needed to get involved in politics.

a. William Wilberforce had been a part of parliament for five years before he became a Christian in 1785. You remember the story – John Newton, a slave trader with a seared conscience that found the grace of God... and then wrote about it in the hymn “Amazing Grace” – John Newton was a part of Wilberforce’s conversion.

2. Newton and several other Christians pleaded with Wilberforce to take action. Wilberforce studied the issue, studied the Scriptures to find God’s opinion on humanity and slavery, and he prayed to know God’s will.

a. Wilberforce’s conclusion on the issue of the slave trade was this, he said: “So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity and carried on as this must be abolished.”⁵

⁴ Vieth, Gene Edward, Jr. “God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life”. Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill, 2002. p. 97.

⁵ “131 Christians Everyone Should Know”. Christianity Today, Inc: Nashville, TN. 2000. p. 283.

C. Wilberforce is a great example. He respected and revered the King of England. He remained beloved in the parliament, even though most people for years hated his position. It would cost them a fortune for Wilberforce to win this debate.

1. But Wilberforce was winsome. He was kind. He was funny. He respected and honored his colleagues in parliament.
2. It took twenty years of debating with passion, consistently lobbying for God's morality in politics, before Wilberforce saw the slave trade abolished in 1807. All of heaven rejoiced in that hour!
 - a. Wilberforce is a good example of someone who submitted to his authority as unto the Lord... yet promoted God's moral law in the life of his nation.

D. What will it look like for you?

1. What does it look like for you to honor & respect & submit to your governing authorities as unto the Lord?
2. And what does it look like for you to pray for and promote change when what you see around you isn't good... isn't as heaven will be someday?

E. I'd like to send you out with these questions today. I'd also like to send you out with a few suggestions for resources to help you.

1. Let me suggest a book... a blog... and a person.
 - a) A Tale of Three Kings
 - b) Between Two Worlds, by Justin Taylor
 - c) The person – JJ Springer
 - i) Before hiring JJ, he worked for Family First – a policy organization in Lincoln that did just what we talked about here at the end... helped Christians think about the issue of the day from a biblical perspective.

Prayer