

Lectionary 22A  
Romans 13:1-14

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*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. 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; 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. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. 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.*

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

When most people are lifting weights or pumping away on a treadmill or elliptical machine, they listen to energetic music. It might be rock or country or even classical music, but they pick something that has a good beat to it to prod them in their exercise. I'm a little weird in my choice of exercise listening, for coming thru the ear buds from my iPod is a series of podcasts on the History of Rome. I've listened to 70 episodes so far, which has taken me up to the time of the Emperor Nero.

The reason I bring this up is that Nero was in power when Paul writes this letter to the Romans, and since our reading this morning begins with Paul saying, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for they are God's servant for your good," it seems to be important to be aware of the context in which Paul is writing. Nero was 16 years old when he became emperor in the year 54 and he reigned for 14 years to the year 68. Scholars think that Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome about the year 60, give or take a year or two, so it would be right in the middle of Nero's reign.

If you know anything about Nero, it is probably these two tidbits – first, the charge that “Nero fiddled while Rome burned,” suggesting that he himself started the fire that destroyed large parts of the city in the year 64 so that he could build a new palace complex on the site (a charge that most historians consider to be false) and secondly, because there were rumors that he had started the fire, Nero used the strange little sect known as Christians as scapegoats, accusing the Christians of starting the fire. The Roman historian Tacitus documents this, describing how Nero had some Christians covered with the skins of wild beasts and thrown to vicious dogs who ripped them apart; others were crucified; and others burned to death, using them as torches to illumine the night. It is likely that the disciple Peter and Paul himself were among the multitude of Christians martyred by Nero at this time.

Based on that, it appears that Nero was a really bad dude. Why would Paul be telling the Christian community in Rome to “be subject to the governing authorities”? Well, it turns out that Nero was not “evil incarnate” and was actually very popular in the early years of his reign. Listen to this and tell me if you would vote for this guy:

- When tax collectors were accused of being too harsh to the poor, Nero changed the collection system to protect them.
- Nero banned any government official from exhibiting public entertainment for fear that the venue was being used as a method to sway the populace (in other words, to buy votes).
- Nero removed many government officials because of their extortion and corruption.
- When further complaints arose that the poor were being overly taxed, Nero attempted to repeal all indirect taxes and finally compromised on a tax cut from 4.5% to 2.5%.
- Nero ordered that secret government tax records be made public.
- To lower the cost of food imports, Nero declared merchant ships to be tax-exempt.

I’m thinking that Nero might get some votes today. So maybe Paul is speaking favorably about the government because, at the time he writes the letter, Nero hasn’t begun persecuting the Christian community yet. Surely in a time of persecution Paul would not have written that the government is God’s servant for our good, and that rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but only to those who break the law! Or would he? Paul knows the story from our First Reading, that Moses and the people of Israel were enslaved by Pharaoh, the governing authority. Paul knows the story of the Maccabean Revolt in 165 B.C. when the people of Jerusalem overthrew the Greek ruler, the governing authority, who desecrated the temple. Paul knows that Jesus was put to death by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. He knows that governing authorities run the gamut from good to evil, yet he doesn’t qualify his statement that every person should be subject to the governing authorities. So what are we to make of this?

First, I want you to know that the committee that put our lectionary together and selected this series of passages from Romans to read this summer skipped these seven verses about the government. If you were faithful to the lectionary selections, you would never hear this passage read at worship. It could be that the committee thought Paul’s words about government are intended only for that era and context and are not applicable today. Or it could be that they took pity on pastors and decided not to force them to preach on such a difficult and potentially controversial text. I don’t know the rationale for their skipping of this passage in the lectionary, but I am of the opinion that we should know and wrestle with difficult texts such as this one. It’s a matter of integrity for us to do so and not pretend they don’t exist.

So here's my take on what Paul is saying in this passage. As with any Biblical text, it is important to note its context – both its historical context (who is the audience and what is their situation?) and its literary context (how does the passage fit with the whole book or letter?).

I've given you a little bit of information about the historical context of Paul's words. He and his audience are part of the Roman Empire during the reign of Nero, whose poll numbers are pretty high at the moment. Paul speaks in general terms of "the governing authorities," but one could make the case that he and his readers were thinking only of their present circumstances, which are pretty good. If you accept that, then Paul's words here about being subject to the government and paying one's taxes are not meant for every time and every situation – they certainly don't apply to the reigns of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Hussein, Mubarek, and Gadhafi, and we have some latitude deciding if they apply to our present situation in the United States and the State of Minnesota.

But I'm going to make the case that Paul means what he says and that it applies to all circumstances IF (and that's a big IF) we understand the literary context of his words.

You may remember several weeks ago that I made the point that Paul did not divide his letter into chapters and verses. Those were added many centuries later. So while for us this is the beginning of chapter 13 and appears to begin a new topic unrelated to chapter 12, it is better for us to understand this as a continuation of the section Paul himself indicated as a new section by the word "Therefore" at the beginning of chapter 12.

*Therefore, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)*

That's the beginning of this section in which we find Paul's teaching about government.

In the first eleven chapters of the letter, one of the key points Paul makes is that our righteousness, our relationship with God, is based not on what we do or don't do, but solely on our trust in what God has done for the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are now free from the law. We don't have to do anything to receive God's love. Then comes Paul's big "THEREFORE" at the beginning of chapter 12. The point of the second section of the letter, following the "therefore," can be stated like this: Because you know that you do not need to do anything to earn God's love (indeed, you can not do anything to earn God's love), therefore, this is how you should live as a disciple of Jesus; these are the actions you should take that will transform your life to be conformed to the will of God.

Paul's words about being subject to the governing authorities must be understood in this context. These verses are not a stand-alone treatise on the relationship between the Christian and the state (although there have been many times in the last 2000 years that they have been misinterpreted to be exactly that). Paul knows that his message of Christian freedom, that we are free from the law, has been misunderstood by some people as license to not obey any rules, that a person can do whatever he or she wants to do.

For Paul to say that government is ordained by God is not to say that God approves of each and every government, regardless of how just it is. Paul is simply affirming that God has given the law to order society. Lutherans call the First, or Civil, Use of the Law. Paul understands government not as an arbitrary human innovation, but something instituted by God to give order to God's creation. It is true that there are good and bad authorities, God-fearing and godless governments. But what they all have in common is that government and law are instituted by God. Paul includes this statement about being subject to the governing authorities and paying taxes to prevent his readers from thinking that their freedom in Christ exempts them from the responsibilities of citizenship.

Using other words, Paul had addressed this same issue in the letter to the Galatians he had written a few years earlier: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." (Galatians 5:13) In Galatians, he follows this with, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Here in Romans 13, he follows his words about being subject to the governing authorities with this same thought: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. [All the] commandment[s] 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."

There have certainly been many times throughout history when leaders of government (whether they have the title of emperor, king, president, or dictator) have abused their power. These words of Paul are not a passage to which a ruler can appeal to tell his citizens that they must obey him because it is God's will that they be subject to them. Rulers are themselves subject to the same law of love, which does no wrong to a neighbor. Paul's intent here is simply to warn his readers that they must not abuse their freedom in Christ thinking they can ignore civil laws, for civil law is one of God's gifts to give order to our society.

Next week we'll wrap up this series on Romans and see what Paul has to say to vegetarians.