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*The Good Life:
Christian Citizen*
Romans 13

It's been a momentous two weeks in the Toone family. Two weeks ago our daughter Rachel was approved by our presbytery to be ordained as a minister in our denomination. And last week, Cyndi and I celebrated our son Cooper's graduation from Whitworth University with a degree in mathematics and business. Mathematics! Clearly that genetic material skipped a generation. We don't even understand the names of the classes he took! Even better news, Cooper has a job... and last week he was looking for an apartment! Did you see the story about 30-year-old man in New York City whose parents took him to court to get him evicted from their house. I'm grateful that we won't have to sue our children to get them launched into independence!

Many thanks to Pastor Megan who pinch hit for me while I was gone. Wow, did she step up to the plate! What a message! You do realize how blessed we are to have a such a deep bench of inspiring preachers?

Just to review Megan's message, in the last part of Romans 12, Paul encourages us to take the low road...the road of humility that Jesus walked...when dealing with difficult people. Bless them instead of cursing them. Overcome evil with good. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live in peace. Win over your enemies with kindness. That's how Paul closes Romans 12 which is really dealing about how we live together.

Interestingly, on the heels of talking about our "enemies," Paul now turns our attention to politics! If there is any realm where the word "enemy" might be used today, it's the political realm, isn't it? I don't recall our country being this polarized since the Vietnam War. It's not just that we disagree politically. We hate our opponents. We demonize those on the other side of the aisle. We view them, not as fellow citizens with whom we disagree...but as our arch enemies.

Paul has something to say about this. Listen to his description of Christian citizenship.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience

In a few weeks some of us will be taking a Reformation tour to Germany. We will walk in the footsteps of Martin Luther. It will be inspiring. But there will be one stop that is more horrifying than inspiring: Dachau. Dachau was the very first the Nazi concentration camp. Do you know how many there were in

total? More than 40,000! Dachau has gas ovens that were never used. Not so in death camps such as Auschwitz where, alone, 1 million Jews were exterminated. The total number of deaths in these camps is not known for sure but some estimates place it at 15 million or more.

When we look into the eyes of Adolf Hitler, we are staring into the eyes of pure evil. A government gone berserk; a people gone mad; a genuinely evil empire.

So, imagine this: In the late 30's and early 40's, there was a group of Protestant churchmen in Germany. They called themselves "German Christians." They came out in support of Adolf Hitler and what he was doing. And one of the arguments with which they buttressed their position was this text: (Romans 13:1)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

So...does the Bible endorse fascism? Can that possibly be right? In a 100-year period when we've had Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Saddam, Khomeini and Kim Jung Un...how can we take a text like this seriously? A member of my LifeGroup said, "I don't like this chapter. I'd like to just cut it out." At first glance, you might agree. But maybe you'll feel differently after we dig in.

First, let me remind you of something: Paul lived at a time when the idea of democracy was still 1500 years away. Rome was a dictatorship. And Roman emperors were generally ruthless men. Caligula... Claudius... Nero. Not nice guys.

Caligula was a sadist who executed his son, his grandmother, his father-in-law and his brother-in-law ...and had incestuous relationships with two sisters...whom he later exiled. One time, Caligula ordered his guards to throw an entire section of the crowd into the arena to be eaten by the animals because there were no more criminals to be executed and he was bored with the games.

Then there was Nero, the emperor at the time Romans was written. Nero executed his own mother and his first wife. He later stomped to death his pregnant second wife. He made Christians the scapegoats for the fire that destroyed Rome. And for fun, he tied Christians to a pole alive, dipped them in pitch and set them on fire to light his garden.

So when we complain about OUR political leaders, we might do well to remember how awful politics were in Paul's time...and how awful were the men who ruled his world. They were enemies of God, enemies of Jews and Christians, and often, enemies of all that was good. It is in THAT context that Paul describes how we are to live as citizens.

I have wrestled with this text this week, and there are 4 things it has taught me about Christian citizenship. I'd like to share them with you. Number 1: All authority is delegated by God. Paul is clear about that: "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." The Bible teaches this repeatedly. In proverbs 8:15 God says, "By me kings reign and rulers decree..." And do you remember when Jesus stood before Pilate? Pilate said, "Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" And Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." The man responsible for crucifying the Messiah...the most diabolical miscarriage of justice in history...even he was delegated his authority by God. All authorities serve only with God's permission.

And how can it be other than that? If we think that a bad guy slips into authority unnoticed by God...or that God is powerless to stop it...what does that say of our view of God? If we think God is truly sovereign...truly Lord over all things...then no one can lead without God's permission.

Point number 2: We are to subject ourselves to that authority. That word "subject" is very important here. It does NOT mean slavish obedience. "Subjection" is a voluntary act of humility that carries a sense of reciprocal service. We find it in Ephesians where we are told to "subject ourselves one to another." As Christian citizens, we are to subject ourselves to the authorities God has put in place...as long as that authority carries out its God-given purpose. So what IS that purpose? Paul makes it clear: Godly government rewards good and punishes evil. And as long as government is fulfilling that God-ordained task, we are to live in subjection to that authority.

BUT here's point number 3: When authorities cease to fulfill their God-ordained purpose, we must resist. In verse 5, Paul says two important things: "Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." God uses government to maintain order by punishing evil-doers. One reason to live as obedient citizens is, we don't want to be punished! I know I'm supposed to come to a complete stop at red lights before making a turn. But I've become particularly careful to observe that law when I'm driving in Fife because one day, one of their little cameras caught me rolling my way around the corner when the light was red. I OUGHT to be conscientious about that rule because it is the law and I'm a good citizen. I have BECOME conscientious about that rule since I incurred the wrath of Fife...authorities that, believe it or not, God has appointed!

But notice the last word: "Conscience." We also live as good citizens because our conscience tells us that is the right thing to do. But ...what if our conscience tells us that is the WRONG thing to do? What if our conscience compels us that a particular law is AGAINST what God says is right and good? In that case, as Christians, for us to obey the authorities would be idolatry. There are plenty of examples of this in scripture. When Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn baby boys, they disobeyed. When Daniel was ordered to pray only to King Darius or face the lions' den, he disobeyed. When Peter and John were told by religious leaders to stop preaching about Jesus, they disobeyed. They replied, "We must obey God rather than men."

Authorities are set in place by God to reward good and punish evil. When they begin to punish good and reward evil, then Christians must resist. In Nazi Germany, there was another group of pastors who, out of conscience, resisted Hitler. Christian leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer even plotted to assassinate him. Their Christian conscience compelled them to rise up against monstrous evil. So, all government authority is permitted by God for the common good. We humbly subject ourselves to that authority...unless our conscience tells us that it has exchanged good for evil.

But here's the deal. If everything is evil, nothing is evil. We have reached a point in our political discourse where we cannot differentiate between what we think is "wrong" and what is "wicked." We are unwilling to speak in ways that honor the highest office of the land because we impute wicked intent to everything that person does. I saw it with President Obama. I see it with President Trump. We don't just think they are wrong... we think they are wicked. There was a time when that office received honor, even if you disagreed with the man. Those days are past. Friday I saw a headline where a Seattle Seahawk called the president "an idiot."

We have come to assume the very worst and we allow our personal indignation to be stoked by our news channel of choice. And we Christians, who ought to know more about grace than the rest of the world, are virtually indistinguishable in the ways we speak about such things. Social media...Facebook

and the like...have turned brothers and sisters in Christ into monkeys in the zoo who throw their poop at each other.

So here comes point 4: The Supreme law is love. In chapter 12, Paul told us to "let love be genuine." In verse 8 he returns to that theme: "Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." He repeats himself twice more. When we vilify ...when we assume the worst...when we assign the most wicked of motives to those with whom we disagree... how can that possibly be faithful to our call to the supreme law of Christian love?

This last week the NFL made a rule that it will fine a team if one of its players kneels during the National Anthem. When I read the article, two thoughts came to mind. First, I found it cynical because it has to do more with money...the fact that they lost 10 percent in attendance last year... than it does with principle. And second, honestly, I was glad. I think it dishonors the flag and, particularly, those who have served and died to protect the very freedoms that allow these athletes to make millions of dollars playing a game.

But as I struggled with this text and the issues behind it, I realized that I have never tried to love the men who protest in this way. I have never tried to understand what might cause them to do such a thing.

I have nothing but respect and admiration for police officers. I have never been pulled over when I didn't deserve to be pulled over. So I do not understand what some of these African-American men have experienced. I don't know that I have ever really tried to understand. And I think that is a failure of love on my part. For surely, one expression of love... which is the only thing that has the power to heal the rift in our nation... is that we truly seek to listen... to understand... to assume the best of ...those with whom we disagree most strenuously. And it better start with us...we who call ourselves by the name of Christ.

So, here's what I have learned about Christian citizenship as I wrestled with this passage.

- I want to be a good citizen as a reflection of my faith in Christ who is my highest authority. I love my country; I love my flag. I love Jesus way more. The cross way more.
- I want to be true to my convictions while, at the same time, seeking to understand those with whom I disagree....and I want to treat them, not as enemies, but as fellow citizens.
- I want to have the maturity to discern between what I think is "wrong" and what God thinks is wicked...and have the courage to stand against the wicked.
- I want love to be the supreme law of my life in all my political considerations.

And on this weekend particularly, I want to remember that there is no greater love than this: "That a man lay down his life for his friends." So I want to be eternally grateful for those who made the ultimate sacrifice so that we might live, not under the boot of tyrants, but in a place of incredible freedom and blessing.

May we, as Christian citizens, contribute to that blessing.