

Special Focus Session

July 19, 2020

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO POLITICS?

Romans 13:1-10

By the final chapters of Romans, Paul's great doctrinal treatise becomes one of application. In chapter 12, he discussed the believer's duty to God ("to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship...") and duty to one another ("Love must be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good..."). Chapter 13 then continues with the same theme—that of Christian duty—but applies it to the civil government. The biblical context is submission to Rome (a rather sore but needful subject); but the principles are equally applicable in our own tumultuous political climate. Christ-followers should be the very best citizens for three reasons:

We submit to authority because of who GOD is (vv. 1-4). I must admit, I have difficulty figuring out how our holy God could elevate such unholy people to such important positions of power...and then make me support them! But that's exactly what these verses suggest. While the main argument is about the authority carried by civil *offices*, each office is occupied by a civil *officer*. How then do I keep my Christian composure when discussing politics? By taking a deep breath and looking at the bigger picture. Six key truths are expressed. First, no one is in any position of civil authority without God's vote (v. 1). Second, the entire concept of governing and authority are part of God's overall plan. He instituted it (v. 1). Third, those who oppose the authority God placed over them are, in essence, opposing God (v. 2). Those who reject authority, then, face judgment (v. 2). Fourth, policies from civil authorities are in place to protect law abiding citizens (v. 3). Fifth, those who live peaceably within the law are pleasing to God (v. 3). Finally, civil authorities have been put into place to reflect God's principles of justice (v. 4). The conclusion? As British Bible commentator Matthew Henry (c. 1700) put it, "Thou hast the benefit of the government; therefore, do what thou canst to preserve it...and nothing to disturb it."

We submit to authority because of who WE are (vv. 5-7). The second reason believers should be model citizens is because of who we are in Christ. While verse 4 reminds us of the *external* motivation for submitting to authority (God's judgment), these verses remind us of the *internal* motivator: the Christian conscience. This is not the same as Holy Spirit conviction, but rather the newly inherited sense of right and wrong that comes with the renewed heart and mind. The obligation of God's people (whether Jewish or Christian) to pay taxes to the oppressive Roman state had long been a bitter pill to swallow (see Matt. 22:15ff). But believers understand that government services must be funded (v. 6), and that good citizens willfully (though sometimes reluctantly!) need to pay their fair share. The bigger principle is one of *obligation*. Verse 7 states it plainly: "Pay your obligations to everyone," regardless of *what* they happen to be, and *who* is on the receiving end. We do this simply because it is the right thing to do as born-again followers of Christ.

We submit to authority because of others (vv. 8-10). These verses are not a reiteration of rules and regulations to follow, but rather serve to sum up the overarching principle. Anglican churchman Charles Ellicott (c. 1850) pointed out:

The word for “owe” in this verse corresponds to that for “dues” (*obligations*) in the last. The transition of the thought is something of this kind. When you have paid all your other debts, taxes, and customs, and reverence, and whatever else you may owe, there will still be one debt unpaid—the universal debt of love. Love must still remain the root and spring of all your actions. No other law is needed besides.

Jesus put it this way in Matthew 22:37ff:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.