

## The Gospel Story: Put on Christ

Romans 13:1-14

Pastor Bryan Clark

We learned in Romans, on the basis of our salvation by grace through faith, that we are to love one another. And we say, “All right, I’m in.” We learned last week that we are to bless those who persecute you. You say, “Well, that’s asking a lot, but I’m in.” This week we learn that you must submit to the government. “Whoa! —just crossed the line—now you’re asking too much.” It’s comforting to know we finally have a weekend to talk about something that’s not controversial at all. (laughter) So, with that spirit, let’s open your Bibles to Romans, Chapter 13.

I think the flow of thought is best understood that, at the end of chapter 12, we are reminded that as individuals, vengeance is not mine. I’m not responsible for administering God’s wrath, but God’s justice and God’s wrath is, to some degree, administered through government. That’s the point he’s going to make; that’s kind of the train of thought. Now I realize there’s a lot of emotional energy around anything related to government and politics. It’d be very helpful if we didn’t read a bunch of that into the text. The principles are fairly simple and let’s at least approach it that way. It’s also good to remind ourselves, of course there’s a dramatic difference between our representative government that we experience and the Roman government of Paul’s day. Paul would have been writing this while Nero was caesar in Rome. Nero was highly immoral; he was very violent; his administration was very corrupt. It just is not possible to make the argument that Paul is writing this because his government was ideal and ours is all messed up. As a matter of fact, that argument has no credibility. Our government would be idealistic compared to what he was enduring in the Roman Empire. As a matter of fact, it’s worth reminding ourselves that Paul would ultimately be executed by the Roman government, so that puts things in a little bit of perspective. Chapter 13 verse 1:

**Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.** (\*NASB, Romans 13:1a)

That gets right to the point, doesn’t it? The word **subjection** is the common word for *submit*. **Everyone** is emphatic. All of us are required before God to submit to governing authorities—local, state and national. Now it doesn’t mean that you can’t disagree. It doesn’t mean you can’t voice your opinion. It doesn’t mean you can’t work for change but, at the end of the day, when the law is the law, then you abide by the law. That’s the idea there. Why?

**For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.** (Vs. 1b)

The reason that we are to be submissive is because authority is established by God. No, it doesn’t mean that God, in a sense, puts everyone in that position or that God approves of everything, but principally speaking, God established government. Remember, when Jesus was on trial He actually said to Pontius Pilate, “*The only reason you have this authority is because my Father gave you this authority.*” Again, reminding us of the same principle, I would say government is a concession to sin. And what I mean by that is: this gets into worldview stuff. If your worldview is that people are basically good and if the government would just get out of the way, we’d all get along and take care of everyone and things would be fine. But the biblical view would be the opposite of that—that we

are all sinners; we all choose to go our own way; so we're selfish and we're sinful and we're arrogant and we're corrupt and, at the end of the day, we'll do what's necessary to have our own way. If it would not be for government, it would be the law of the jungle. You couldn't even walk down the sidewalk in safety. So government is a concession to sin. It's necessary in order to make it possible for us to have a life. That's the idea there.

**Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.** (Vs. 2)

Again it's talking about the laws of the lands and those who enforce those. If you disobey the law, you're disobeying God because God is the one that established authority. It's fairly straightforward there. Verse 3:

**For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same;**

Now I think verse 3 defines the biblical role of government. I think the biblical role of government would be to promote good and to punish evil. Because there's sin in the world and all that goes with that, there has to be a structure and authority that promotes good and punishes evil, in order that we can live in safety. Now every person in the room this morning probably has a different opinion on what you think should be the role of government—*more* and *less*—and all these ideas, and that's fine. But biblically speaking, the role is to promote good and to punish evil. Everything else, I would say, is up for discussion.

The text reminds us that you shouldn't fear the government as long as you choose to do right—in other words you obey the laws. Now I suppose we could all identify some abusive rogue regime where that's not true but, by and large, if you obey the laws, you have the opportunity to live in the favor of the government. Certainly that's true in our case. In the first century there was a lot of confusion. As people came into a relationship with God, then they answer to God as the king and it created some confusion. If God is our king, and we're now in the kingdom of God, what's our responsibility to a human king and a human kingdom—an earthly kingdom? And some of the Christians were getting the idea: I don't have to listen to Rome; I answer to God now—and that had created some pretty serious problems within the Roman Empire. So Paul is saying, "You're still responsible to obey the laws of the Roman Empire," so that's kind of the heartbeat behind the discussion here. Verse 4:

**for it is [meaning government or governing authorities] a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.**

You can see the connectivity to the end of chapter 12, that government does have the responsibility to punish evil. That's one of the ways that God administers wrath. The text reminds us that if you do evil, you suffer the consequence. If you break the law, you suffer the consequence. The governing authorities are referred to as **ministers of God**. That's the Greek words that's translated *deacons*, often translated *servants*. So the governing authorities are God's deacons and they carry out God's authority on earth, which includes the punishing of evil. So he says they **don't bear the sword for nothing**.

Now in the Roman Empire they didn't have all these divisions of the military and law enforcement like we have today. They had an army and the army went out to fight battles out beyond their borders, and the army was responsible for keeping order within the empire. It was the army and the army bore the sword, which was the sign of authority and punishment. And I think all the way to capital punishment, that's the idea there—again reminding ourselves that one day the apostle Paul himself would be executed by the sword of the Roman government.

This does kind of open up the conversation related to capital punishment because that's primarily what he's talking about—law enforcement all the way to that degree. There are so few biblical texts that really throw the door open quite this clearly, that I don't want to just pass it by. I want to talk about it a little bit and I would say, over the last several years, I've changed my opinion on this matter. So I would just ask that you hear me out. I have no doubt that I'm going to upset some of you, but at least hear me out in terms of my reasoning. I would say the biblical principle is that governments have the option of capital punishment—they aren't required but it's an option on the table. It goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 9, verse 6. Before the law was ever in place, it was just simply based on the fact that people are made in the image of God and if you kill someone made in the image of God, then you give your life in return. Some people find the idea of capital punishment to be in conflict with the pro-life position. I don't find their conflict at all; it's actually right in alignment. A life is so valuable that if a life is taken, a life must be given. It reflects the value of life. Now when you go through the Old Testament, there's no question that God, over and over again, called the Israeli army to battle, and what they did is take a sword, go to battle, and kill people, in the name of promoting what is good and punishing that which is evil. So there's no way you can make the argument from the Old Testament that that behavior was somehow offensive to God. Sometimes people say, "Well, don't the Ten Commandments say, 'Thou shalt not kill?'" But in the Hebrew words, there's a distinction between *killing* and *murdering*. Literally, in the Ten Commandments it is "Thou shalt not *murder*," which means to kill somebody *unlawfully*. But the word to *kill* is a different word—and again, often God sent the Israeli army into battle to kill people. There's no question about that.

So then you get to the New Testament and you have a statement like this, where Paul is not criticizing, but actually saying: Rome, as a deacon of God, carries out the wrath of God, which can include capital punishment—bearing the sword. But every time we've had this discussion, I've always maintained the position that there are always two parts to this discussion. One is the biblical principle, and I've not changed my mind on that. But the other part of it is whether or not a government has the moral capacity to administer capital punishment in a way that's just and fair—and that's a whole separate discussion. I would say, over the last few years, as a result of reading a lot of information, of talking to people, doing a lot research myself, I have come to the conclusion: I don't think we do. It's a very sobering thing to take a person's life. It must be done with justice; it must be done with fairness, and when you begin to study the information that's out there, what you find is it often isn't done in justice and fairness. Now I'm not talking about the State of Nebraska. We do it so seldom it's hard to even have that discussion. But nationwide there's no question, in my opinion, it's driven by politics; it's driven by election; it's driven by whether it's an election cycle; it's driven by the attention of the media; it's driven by whether the media makes a story out of something or not; it's driven by whether the perpetrator was rich or poor or white or black or Hispanic; it also matters significantly if the victim was rich or poor or whether the victim was white or Hispanic or black. When you start doing the research, what you find is this is far more political and far more social and far more racial than it is fair and just. Now I understand the principle, biblically speaking, but I also understand another principle, and that is the people of God are called to justice and to be the voice of justice for God.

Last year at this time we were going through the book of Amos and the series was *Let Justice Roll*, and we reminded ourselves that it's the job of the people of God to be the voice of justice, to be the voice of fairness for those who may not be treated fairly in our society, for those who might be disadvantaged, for those that don't have the resources, for those that are poor—that we are the voice that stands up for justice. Now think about it this way. As we have drifted farther and farther from God and become more and more secular, do you really think that we have the moral capacity to carry out a sentence like that with justice and fairness before God? My conclusion—this is just my opinion—is we do not. If we're going to do something as sobering as take a life, we'd better do it with justice and fairness or not do it.

Now in the Roman Empire the people had no say. Nero's going to do what Nero's going to do. But we don't live in the Roman Empire. We live in a place where we can make our voice heard. We can have an opinion; we can say what we think. And I'm just telling you, that's my opinion, and I've changed my opinion over the last couple of years. Now if, after the service, you'd like to know how to get access to more of that information, study that yourself, come to your own conclusions, just come down and find me down front and I'll help you get connected with that. If you'd like to come down front after the service and just yell at me so that you'll feel better, feel free. Just please, wait in line one at a time. (laughter) The text goes on. Verse 5:

**Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.**

In other words saying, there are two reasons why we should submit to government: One, simply because it's right, because they represent God on earth, and number two, because if you disobey, you suffer the consequences. That's basically what's being said there. Verse 6:

**For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.** (Vs. 6-7)

So there is a mandate to pay your taxes. Why? Because it pays governing authorities, in order that they would carry out their assignment to promote good and to punish evil. We still end up with the realization that we don't live in the Roman Empire. There are significant differences between the government of Paul's day and our representative government, so let's talk about that for a few minutes.

To start with, I'd like us to focus our attention on the fact that the freedom and the lifestyle and the prosperity we have is such that few people in the history of the world have ever known what we have. Before we get too critical of the government and governing authorities and all that, let's at least be thankful that we live at a level that few people have ever had the privilege of living at and be thankful and respectful for what we have—because we have a lot. I would say, as a church, as Christians, we basically have the unrestricted freedom to accomplish the mission of the church. It's a privilege that few Christians in the history of Christianity have ever had. There's no way that one day we could sit before God and say the reason we didn't accomplish the mission is because the government got in the way. No way! We have unimaginable freedom and we need to appreciate that; we need to steward that freedom. We experience safety; we experience prosperity; we experience freedom at a level few people have ever known.

Second of all, there are sobering responsibilities that go with having a representative democracy. The first century Christians could not be held accountable for Nero's behavior. They had no say in the matter. We don't have the same opportunity. We have a government *of the people, for the people, by the people*. We're culpable for the decisions our leaders make. It's a sobering responsibility. When I vote for someone who promotes laws and behaviors that are offensive to God, am I responsible for that? The answer is: of course I am. I'm definitely culpable on that; there's no way I can say that's not my responsibility. Some people, in order to avoid that, just don't vote at all, but passively standing on the sideline and doing nothing while it happens doesn't escape responsibility. I think one of the sobering parts of having a representative democracy is that we are responsible and we'd better take our responsibility very seriously because I do think we'll give an account before God.

I also think that, in a representative government, the government isn't leading; the government is reflecting. In other words, we're the ones putting them there. If those weren't our values, we wouldn't keep reelecting them. So, rather than leading the nation, I think they reflect who we are as a nation. Every election cycle, it's a snapshot of what we've become as a nation. If that's true, then here's the sobering responsibility we have as Christians. In order for something significant to change, it won't change by changing the government. It will only happen when we change as a nation. Our responsibility, as *The Church*, is not political. I think there are members of the church that are called into governing offices and governing positions and I say, "God bless them." That's a sobering responsibility; it's a high calling. But we, together as a church, our mission is not political. It's the *Great Commission*; it's to declare the message of Jesus, the life-changing message of the gospel. But I would say this: If the church around the United States would get serious about her mission and seek to change the nation, one person at a time, to overcome evil with good, to be proclaimers of the message of Jesus, if we as a church would do our job, it would be the most significant catalyst for changing the government. So it comes back: frankly, the nation would not be in this predicament if we as a church, nationwide, would have done our job.

I was reminded this week that there are courageous people who are out there everyday fighting for our freedoms, fighting against laws that restrict our freedoms. They're doing their part courageously so that we can do our part. We need to be as zealous; we need to be as courageous; we need to be as diligent about the mission of the church because if we are zealous about our mission, people's lives are changed one person at a time. If you want to change the government, change the nation. And we as a church are called to be a catalyst to change.

We still come down, though, to the question: Do we obey the government in everything or are there times when it's right to disobey? First of all, I would say you have no right before God to disobey just because you don't like a law or because you don't agree with a law. The only time you have the right to disobey, before God, is when that law is contrary to the law of God. Then, God's law must always trump human law. Now some people would put taxes in that category because the government uses tax money to promote behaviors and activities that are offensive to God—"Then we shouldn't pay taxes." I'd be the first one to agree with you that yes, they do. They take tax money and they use it for things that are offensive to God. I agree with that, but I go back to Jesus, under the Roman government that was more corrupt, and Jesus said, "Pay your taxes". I go back to the apostle Paul in this text, under the government of Nero, that was more corrupt, and Paul said, "Pay your taxes". So I think the example is: I pay my taxes even if the government isn't exactly in alignment with my value system. Besides, if you're going to take that logic all the way down, you frankly couldn't spend a penny on anything, because eventually you spend money that goes to people and suppliers and all kinds of places where you know nothing about them, but I'd almost

guarantee you ninety percent of the behavior that's funded by that money ends up being offensive to God. There's no way to really live that value system. So we pay taxes. That's what the text says.

But let's imagine the government said our nation's getting entirely too crowded, so every woman is allowed to have two children. After that, every child must be aborted. We would say that's a law you must disobey because it's contrary to the law of God. Maybe the law comes along and says churches are required to carry out same-sex marriages. That's a law we would say we can't obey because God's law trumps human law.

There are some countries of the world where they have what they call anti-conversion laws, which basically means it's fine for you to love Jesus, but you're not allowed to convert anybody else. If our country had an anti-conversion law, we as a church would have to say that's a law we disagree with; we'll have to break that law. It's entirely possible that, at some point, there will be a law that says if you preach against certain behaviors as sin, that will be considered a hate crime, subject to the law, and we will have to say that's a law we'll have to break because God's law trumps human law. Now there are Christians around the world that have to deal with this every day. But frankly, it would be a rare exception for us in this country. Again, we have significant freedoms and we need to be good stewards of the freedoms we have to accomplish the mission.

The text seems like it takes a strange turn, then, starting in verse 8.

**Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law. (Vs. 8-10)**

It seems like he really kind of changes the subject, but I would suggest he really doesn't. What he's saying is: everything that we've previously discussed in chapter 13 is necessary because we made the decision to go our own way. If we chose to do it God's way, there'd be no need for governments; there'd be no need for laws. *If we loved the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loved our neighbor as ourselves*, you wouldn't need all those laws. You wouldn't need the threat of punishment. People would just simply do the right thing. There is a reminder in the text that God's way is the best way. The reason we have all these structures and rules and punishments is because we've gone our own way and certainly we, as Christians, ought to lead the way back. We ought to be those that model the life of love—to love God and to love our neighbors as our self—driven not by human law, driven not by fear of consequences, but just simply doing the right thing because it is, indeed, the right thing. The farther we drift from God, the more secular we become; the more it becomes necessary to control us as a culture. Now think about this: Over the last generation or two, as we have become more and more secular, isn't it true that the government has intruded more and more into every area of life? More laws, more rules, more policies, more restrictions. That's not a coincidence. The farther we drift from God, the more secular we become, the more selfish we become and the more problems it creates and the more governing authorities have to step in and try to deal with all of this.

There would be a lot of people, maybe everybody in this room—I don't know—who would say we would like less government. But you can't just say we want less government. That won't work. People are out of control. The only way you can have less government is if the people return to God. It's only when people, of their own free will, choose to do the right thing that you can have

less laws and less restrictions and less government into everything. So now we're back to the mission of the church—to understand our sobering responsibility. If a nation is going to come back to God, whose responsibility is it? Isn't it the responsibility of the church? Isn't it our responsibility to lead the way? The only way you're going to get less government is for the people to move back to God and back to God's value system. So, again, it reminds us that we have a very sobering assignment. Once again, I don't think the church is called to be political, but if the church would be *the church* across the United States, it would be the single most significant catalyst for changing the government. So we have a sobering responsibility, as the people of God. Verse 11:

**Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.** (Vs. 11-14)

Basically the text is saying there's a sense of urgency: that Jesus is coming back. This time period, this culture, is described as **darkness** and we're called to be **a light** in the darkness, but there's an imagery where it looks like the sun is starting to rise and this age is going to come to a close and Jesus is going to return. We would certainly say we're closer to that today than they were in Paul's day. It's meant to create a sense of urgency. We need to get with it. We have a job to do before it's too late, and to do that job it uses a familiar imagery: take off the dirty clothes that defined your life before Christ and it makes a list of just a sampling of those behaviors. Rather, we should put on Christ. We should put on the clothing of this new life in Christ. Make no provision for the flesh but live this new life in Christ as our witness to a dark and dying world.

So here's the deal. If the church is called to be *The Church*, to live on mission, to change the world, it has to start with each one of us individually living on mission. There's no way for the church to accomplish that if we, ourselves, aren't living out this new life in Christ, if we aren't taking off the dirty, filthy, shameful clothing that defined our lives before Christ and putting on the newness of Christ, putting on love the Lord your God and love your neighbor, and living that way and modeling that and inviting others into it. That's the basic essence of the mission.

So this is what I would ask of you. I would suggest that every single one of us, as Christians, examine our own hearts, examine our own lives. There's no way the church can be the church if the people of God are not walking in the freedom of Christ, they're not putting on the new clothing of Christ—the righteousness of Christ. So it requires each of us to examine our own lives. So here's what I would say. I would encourage every single one of us to stop criticizing the government; stop criticizing the people around you; stop blaming everyone else until you have looked at your own life and made sure that, behind closed doors in secret, you are walking uprightly. Until you yourself are rightly representing Jesus, until you yourself are walking in righteousness and have cleaned up your own act, stop pointing fingers at anyone else. Stop blaming the government; stop blaming the people around you; stop pointing fingers. In essence, I guess what I'm saying is: keep your mouth shut until you have got your own act together, because that's where we start in being the church as God has called us to be The Church.

*Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us and are unbelievably patient with us. Lord, there are people here this morning that everyday seek to walk uprightly. They do rightly represent new life in Christ, and everyday they invite others into that which has so changed their life. But, Lord, I also know there are many people here this morning that, behind closed doors, in secret, there is stuff going on that's offensive to You. It, in no way, reflects this new life in Christ. Lord, we all get really good at blaming others and pointing fingers and criticizing everything else to avoid looking deep within ourselves. So, Lord, in these quiet moments ahead, examine our hearts, convict us of sin, that we might start to be the church by walking uprightly as the people of God. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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## **The Gospel Story: Put On Christ**

*A Study of Romans*

Romans 13:1-14

Pastor Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. What do you understand to be the role of government? What makes a good government and what makes a bad government in your opinion?
2. Can you disagree with governing authorities and still maintain a respectful attitude toward those in authority? What constitutes a disrespectful attitude?
3. Do you think we as American Christians could stand before God and blame our government for why we did not accomplish our mission? Why or why not?
4. Like in any relationship, it's tempting to focus on the bad rather than all that's good. We as Americans probably experience as comfortable a lifestyle as any people ever in history. What are the benefits of living in America that we experience and probably take for granted every day?

### **Bible Study**

1. Read Romans 13:1-7. Compare what Jesus said in Matthew 22:15-22. Compare also I Peter 2:13-17. What should be our attitude toward governing authorities according to these texts? Why?
2. What do you know about the Roman government that was ruling when Paul wrote Romans 13? Why should Christians submit to a corrupt government according to the text?
3. Romans 13:4 refers to the Roman government as "bearing the sword." While some may argue this point, most see this as a clear reference to Rome administering the death penalty. Rather than criticizing this practice Paul seems to affirm it is part of the role of government as a ministry of God. Compare Genesis 9:6. What is the principle here? The people of God are also called to fight for justice and fairness in the administration of the law. See Amos 5:24. Do you believe we today as a nation are in a position to administer such a final

judgment on people according to justice and fairness without regard to media pressure, politics, racial or socio-economic factors? Does the evidence support your conclusion?

4. The dynamics of government in first century Rome and our government today are quite different. What is our responsibility and culpability in a democratic republic? When do you believe we as Christians have a right to disobey governing authorities? Why?
5. Read Romans 13:8-14. Why do we need governing authorities? Would these authorities be necessary if we loved our neighbors? Why or why not? Do you think it's true then that the more secular we become as a nation the more government will exercise its authority? Why or why not?
6. Why should we make sure that we, as Christians, are diligent about the things that really matter? Why should there be a sense of urgency? Is there anything in our country that prohibits us from living this way?

## **Application**

1. Does it really make sense for us to be critical of governing authorities (most of whom don't even know Christ) if we, as Christians, are not living according to Romans 13:9-14? The first step in setting things right is to get our own act together. What does that mean for you?
2. Since our current government doesn't really prohibit you from fulfilling the mission of the Church, what should you be busy about today?
3. What are some creative ways we can get involved in local and national solutions to our problems without compromising our Christian witness?