

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Romans 13:1-7  
Sermon Title: "Law-Abiding Citizen" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA  
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**{SLIDE 1}** We are skipping a few chapters in Paul's letter to the Romans, and we are landing on Chapter 13, where he talks about the Roman government. Tomorrow is Independence Day, and what better topic to discuss than the government. That's one of our favorite topics, isn't it?

From time to time we will think about the government, especially when the news mentions it on the TV or Internet. We hear about what they are doing and what they are not doing. We get frustrated with our government, and we might agree with their approval rating which is at 13% according to recent polls.<sup>1</sup> Last week during VBS I asked my adult class this question: "Think of an area of life in which you, your community, or the world is experiencing darkness, chaos, and meaninglessness?" One adult suggested Congress are one of those voids – one of those empty holes – that we have to put up with, and even pray for."

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional\\_job\\_approval-903.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional_job_approval-903.html).

**{SLIDE 2}** We might not think much about our American government, but then the new Christians who lived in Rome had to put up with the Roman Senate during their time. The Empire of Rome was ruled by a gathering of officials who oversaw much of what happened within their borders. The Senate held considerable authority in Roman politics: receiving ambassadors from other countries on behalf of Rome, appointing officials to manage and govern provinces, declaring war and negotiating peace, and appropriating funds for various projects such as public building construction.<sup>2</sup> The military structure and religious practices were controlled by the Roman Senate – more of that a little later. It was one of the longest lasting government bodies to ever exist in human history, beginning as a governing body when Rome itself was founded in 753 BC.<sup>3</sup>

Along the way, the Roman Senate had to deal with barbarian nations that tried to take over their lands. They had to deal with religious uprisings, when certain groups felt the government was overstepping their bounds. They also had to deal with dictators, Caesars who came to power and assumed absolute authority. We really shouldn't cry to the Roman Senate when it comes to the attacks they endured. The Senate

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unrv.com/empire/the-senate.php>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Senate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Senate).

oversaw many attacks on many independent nations.

**{SLIDE 3}** The Pax Romana was a period in time, in which Rome supposedly saw peace among their people and cities. The Senate directed the Pax Romana, making sure that every Roman citizen did not live under the threat of war and that their lives would be as serene and simple as possible. The word Pax Romana means Roman Peace, but this is misleading. Roman Peace was carried out at the end of a very sharp sword.

Roman Peace meant that the Senate did everything to make sure the military was well-supplied and that the military suppressed every uprising that reared its ugly head. If you did not want to live serenely and simply, you would be forced to live serenely and simply. There was no monkey business here. There was always something for the military to do to keep the peace. I once heard a professor say that there was a temple in Rome to the god Janus that had doors on either end. Those doors would be closed during times of peace, but during times of war those doors stood open. During most of the so-called Pax Romana, the temple doors remained open.

**{SLIDE 4}** Paul understood the power of the Roman Senate. He grew up as a Roman citizen but he also grew up as a Jew. And he watched how the Jews

suffered under Roman law. He saw how the Senate would cross over one line and then another, and how Jews zealots would rise up and oppose the intrusion of Roman laws. The Jews might be able to worship in the temple, but it was Roman rulers in Judea who selected the chief priest. We had said before that the military structure and religious practices were controlled by the Roman Senate. This included everything that involved the Jews. The Jews had to put up with what the Senate and the Roman leaders wanted, and they hated it.

Things got so bad that in 49AD, the Emperor got sick and tired of the Jews' rebellion that he kicked them out of the city until Emperor Nero let them come back. In 68AD the Senate called the military to wage war against Jerusalem and besiege it. In 70AD they overran Jerusalem and the great temple was destroyed. Around 135AD, the Senate and Caesar would be completely finished with the Jews, so much so that they would kick all Jews out of Jerusalem forever and rename the city after the Emperor Hadrian.<sup>4</sup>

**{SLIDE 5}** Now, I thank you for being patient during this brief history lesson, because it does have a

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<sup>4</sup> Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History*, cf. 86-105, 137-138.

point. By the time Paul writes to the Romans, the Senate and Emperor are just barely tolerating the Jews for their religious practices and ideals. They allow the Jews to worship, but they do not allow them to rebel against Roman authority. And now a new sect of people arise calling themselves Christians. They believe in a Person who died on a cross, a form of capital punishment in Rome, similar to the electric chair or lethal injection... These Christians worship a Person who died like a criminal, and yet this Person rose from the grave and nobody knows where he is. These Christians are traveling around, making disciples who follow this Person, Jesus, with all their hearts.

How does Rome deal with them? How does the Senate and Emperor control this new group? Will they gather in large numbers and incite riots? If they profess Jesus as Lord, and yet not profess the Caesar as lord, then how does the Senate make them toe the politically-correct line?

**{SLIDE 6}** It is dangerous for these new Christians to believe as they do. At any moment their faith could be questioned, and they could be arrested, jailed, and even martyred for their faith. Paul write his letter to the Romans during the time of Nero's reign. Nero had lifted the previous Caesar's banned on Christians

living in Rome, which sounds like a nice thing on Nero's part. But over ten years later he will oversee a great fire that destroys much of Rome, and the Christians will be blamed for it. Nero and the Senate will not look favorably on Christians, telling everyone that they are monstrous people who do monstrous things. Historians believe that Nero allowed for the fire to rage, because he was looking for room to build an immense palace to him, with a huge swimming pool and towering statue of himself and all. It is easier for Nero to blame Christians than to get his selfish desire approved.

**{SLIDE 7}** Life is risky, unstable, unsafe for Christians. So what does Paul say in Romans 13? "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities..."<sup>5</sup> Be subject? What? Paul says to "be under obedience, to put oneself under, to submit oneself unto the governing authorities. These are the same authorities who might kill Christians for their faith. These are the same authorities who promote a Pax Romana, a Roman Peace with brutal force. Paul wants these new Christians to be subject to them.

And then Paul doubles down in the next sentences: "For there is no authority except from God, and those

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<sup>5</sup> Verse 1.

authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement.” What is Paul talking about? Is he crazy?

**{SLIDE 8}** Let us consider this at the very beginning: Christians are not anarchists to submit to no authority.<sup>6</sup> God is our ultimate authority. We gladly submit ourselves to God, taking on the life of Jesus Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit in all we do and think and say. So we don't live aimless lives – we live the life God has for us.

Since God is our ultimate authority, we believe that no authority can be given to anyone unless it comes from God. We acknowledge that there are leaders in the government – people placed in charge of how the country functions – but they are not in charge unless God gave them the position to be in charge. When Jesus was standing before Pilate, who was asking him a bunch of questions, at one point Jesus says, “You would have no power, no authority, over me if it were not given to you from above.”<sup>7</sup> God places people in places of authority, and they are supposed to use that power for good. They too must not be rebellious but be subject to God as leaders who take

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<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, 72.

<sup>7</sup> John 19:11.

on Jesus' life and follow the Holy Spirit's lead. Sadly, not all leaders do this. The Neros, Herods, Caligulas, Hitlers, Idi Amins and Stalins of the world can have their own minds and abuse people for their selfish gain. God gives authority to all leaders, and they still can misuse it. It is between them and God to figure out how they should lead, and become the leaders God expects them to become.

But Paul doesn't spend a lot of time figuring out who is a godly leader or not. In Romans 13, he puts the responsibility squarely on those new Christians who live with a Senate and Emperor over them. They cannot control the way leaders will leader, any more than we can control every move Congress makes in Washington DC. What we can do is submit ourselves to God as our ultimate authority. And then, we ought to submit ourselves to the authorities that God has placed over us.

**{SLIDE 9}** Paul gives a spiritual and a practical reason for doing this. The practical first: the government will come after you, if you rebel. Paul says in verse 4, "If you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!"<sup>8</sup> Paul knew about the Pax Romana. He had no

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 13:4.

fantasies about it. So, he says to these new Christian that if they rebel, the government will come down on them, and come down on them hard. Don't let that happen.

Now here is the spiritual reason: rebellion against the government is rebellion against God. We established that God has given authority for people to lead. They could abuse that power, yes, but their main function is to make sure people live in peace. People are relatively security and cared for. If people rebel, they fight against the peace and unity of that order which government tries to keep for everyone, the peace and unity that God wants us all to have according to his will.

It doesn't matter if it is a government or a church or a family, God calls us to be in community. God calls us to love one another in that community, and to respect positions of leadership when people have to assume them. God wants us to work together, and to work with God to promote God's kingdom. When there is discord, when there is fighting, the community breaks down, whether it is in a family or a church or a government. God's will is not carried out, and so the wrongdoers should be disciplined in some manner. The discord and fighting cannot go on. God doesn't will this for us.

{SLIDE 10} One of my commentaries pointed me back to Romans 12 as another way to look at the spiritual reason for why we should respect our leaders. “Let love be genuine,” Paul says in Romans 12:9, “hate what is evil, hold onto what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” We might think these words apply only to the Church, and to the Christians we know. Paul means for these words to apply to everybody in every situation, including to politicians in Washington DC or Atlanta or anywhere else.

We might not like certain politicians and the positions they hold. We know that people may hate one of the two candidates that are running for the Office of President. Both candidates are not winning popularity contests with every voter. It doesn't matter what we think of them, we still have to follow God's command on our lives. We still have to love all of God's people which may include the politicians we despise. We might not fully agree with what God wants us to do, but we cannot disagree with what God is trying to do with this world: bring it together under the banner of his love. God is trying to get us out of our selfishness and transform us into people who think of others more highly than ourselves.

God even uses governments to bring people together. God establishes people in certain positions

to carry out God's will of thinking of others more highly than themselves. Leaders do not get it right all the time. God still works through them. God calls us to respect the efforts they make. Do not rebel. Do not fight. Pay taxes, follow the laws, pray for our leaders, try to understand their positions, promote care and grace to all.

Besides, we have a much easier time with following Paul's words in Romans 13. We do not live in the same world as those new Christians did many years ago. We do not have the government questioning our faith and killing us for when we do not denounce it. We do not have leaders blaming Christians for all the wrong that happens in the nation. We have never experienced a great persecution, in which family members could be collected and vanish without a trace, all because they believe in Jesus Christ.

When we hear the rhetoric on the news about our nation falling apart, do not believe it. Do not believe the scare-mongering or the false information. We do not live under a Pax Americana with the military keeping order at the end of a machine gun.

We do not live in the same dangerous world as the Roman Christians did, and they died for their faith. We are not dying for our faith. We still have breath to worship God. We still have freedom of movement to

share God's word with others. We still live in a nation where we can abide with others peaceably. We can pray that our political leaders will follow God's lead as we do.

It is easier for us to follow Paul's words today. We carry out God's will when we do. We show that we trust God will do the best for our nation and even for the world.

## **Assurance of Pardon:**

Hear the Good News from Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of the benefits of the One who pardons all your guilt, and heals all your sufferings, who redeems your life from the grave and surrounds you with steadfast love and tender affection." God fully blesses us. We may trust Jesus' mercy and patience. We receive life from the Holy Spirit, and are made new. Brothers and sisters, believe and accept forgiveness from God! Amen.