

Who needs a government?

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Date: 01 May 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, it's been an interesting week for South Africa as a country. We celebrated on Wednesday, Freedom Day, when we, in 1994, broke away from the rule of the oppressive apartheid system.

It was a very important day, those 20 or so years ago. More than that now. What is it, 22 years ago? So that was on Wednesday.

And yet, then on Friday, we were reminded that 22 years on, not a whole lot has improved, as our president stands to face 738 charges of corruption. That was announced on Friday.

Which, when we reflect on the last few decades, leads us to a question that I want us to consider this morning, which is, do we really need a government at all?

Think about it. Surely, after everything we see in the news, government is more trouble than it's worth. You might say, of course we need a government.

[0 : 59] We need a police force. We need an army. We need health care. We need someone to build and maintain our roads. And so, that's why we need government. It's a kind of a necessary evil. But do we?

Think about it. Theoretically, all of these things could be provided privately, couldn't they? Like we have in South Africa, we have private police, essentially, and armed response companies, who, in my experience, are sometimes even more effective than the state police, aren't they?

We've got private health care, private medical aides. In many countries, there are roads that are built and maintained completely through tolls. In other words, privately funded by the people who use those roads.

And so, government doesn't have to pay for them. Even the poor can be looked after through private non-profit organizations. And so, essentially, everything the government does could be done privately.

And so, do we really need a government? Think about it. And there are many people that are, especially more and more in South Africa today and around the world, who argue quite successfully that government is not necessary.

[2 : 03] And argue for the abolition of government. And they make good cases. They say that, well, taxation is just a legal form of theft. And all government does, really, is force people to do things that they don't really want to do.

And so, why do we need them at all? I wonder what you think. What do you think? Do we need government? Well, we've been working through the book of Romans, looking at the various ways that God wants to transform us through the gospel of Jesus.

And that's what Paul starts to talk about in chapter 12. And he talks about how the gospel changes everything in our lives when we believe it.

It changes how we relate to other people. It changes how we live. And coming to church, we were reminded last week, coming to church and being part of the Christian community, sitting under God's word on a regular basis, is the way that God transforms us.

This is the cocoon in which the transformation process happens from what we were to what God wants us to be. And last week, we saw what that means with respect to our enemies and how we are transformed even in how we relate to our enemies, that instead of repaying evil with evil, we learn to repay evil with good and not try to take matters into our own hands and get even, but rather trust that God will do right for us in his time.

[3 : 22] That was all last week. And that is a gospel attitude. You see, all of these passages that we're reading through are encouraging us to have a gospel attitude, a new changed attitude, a renewed mind about various aspects of our lives.

It was Jesus' attitude when he faced hostility. He didn't retaliate, but he left it to his father. And that's the attitude that Jesus' followers are called to have as well.

But now we read on in Romans chapter 13, and we discover that that gospel attitude even extends to how we relate to our government.

That's the topic that Paul now talks about, and whether we're actually willing to submit to our governments and uphold our governments, even if we don't like our governments.

As Paul puts it in Romans 13 verse 1, have a look in your Bibles. He says Christians in this world are actually called to be subject to their governments, to be subject to the governing authorities.

[4 : 21] Now, we've got to understand what that means. What does it mean to be subject to our governing authorities? And the first thing we need to know is that this doesn't mean that we are always just to blindly obey our governments, because the truth is governments themselves can often be evil.

Just think of the Nazi German government of the 1930s and 40s, or the apartheid government in our own country pre-1994. And in many cases in the Bible, and in more recent history, God's people have needed to disobey governments in order to obey God.

So a classic example is in Acts chapter 5. You don't have to turn there, but you might remember Peter and some other apostles are commanded by the Jewish authorities not to preach about Jesus.

And they don't listen. They disobey, and they explain to them, we must obey God rather than men.

Or another example right back in Exodus, we read about the Hebrew midwives, remember, commanded by the Egyptian government to kill all the male babies that are born, the Israelite male babies, and they disobeyed.

And they were commended by God for disobeying their government in that case. And so Paul is not teaching just blind obedience to government here. But he is teaching subjection or submission to governments, which is a different thing.

[5 : 47] To submit, you see, in the Bible, means to recognize and to respect someone's God-given authority, God-given role, irrespective of whether or not they're carrying out that role properly.

It means, so far as it doesn't compromise our duty to God, it means to place ourselves voluntarily under the authority of someone else, because that's the way God has structured things.

That's what it means to submit. Now we might say, Paul, that's all very well and good for you, where you come from, but come live in South Africa for a while, Mr. Paul, and tell us to respect and submit to a government that fails to keep its promises, and to a president who puts his own interests first.

Respect your government. Whatever, Paul. Well, we forget that when Paul wrote this, the government of the day was essentially a pagan Roman dictatorship, which was in many ways no better than the worst government we have today.

You see, Paul wasn't ignorant when he wrote this. He knew full well about bad and corrupt governments. And yet he writes that Christians are to submit to whatever government is over them.

[7 : 01] Now why? Why is it so important? And why is it in the Bible? Why does God care whether we submit to our governments or not? Well, there are two main reasons that we see in this passage, why we should respect and submit to governments.

And when we read, we see it's got nothing to do with roads or army or health care. It's much more fundamental than that. And the first reason we see is that government is God's idea.

Government is God's idea. Have a look at verse one. Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

It's quite a big thing to say. And because it's such a surprising thing, he reiterates, the authorities that exist have been established by God.

He just repeats himself because people need a double take for such a big truth. He's saying that God establishes governments, not us. Which sounds odd because it seems like we establish governments as people, doesn't it?

[8 : 05] That they're just human institutions made by people and for people. But we read here, no, God invented government. The very idea of having certain people rule over and administer a nation is God's idea.

So according to the Bible, you see, government, human government is something that God has built into the created order. This is the same as God designed a beehive to function with a queen or a wolf pack to function with an alpha male.

So humans need leaders too. We're part of creation and God has built order into this creation, even order into human societies. That's how God designed us. We need leaders and we express this need, even if not consciously we express it in how we structure our world, don't we?

A business needs a CEO. A ship needs a captain. Imagine a ship with two guys in charge. They'll argue about which direction the ship would go.

No, there needs to be one guy in charge. We need leaders. A church needs a pastor, unfortunately for some. But you see, whether we like it or not, we need leaders.

[9 : 13] That's how God has created human society. And so that's why he came up with this idea of governments. And in order for governments to work properly, God invests governments with the authority they need to be able to lead effectively.

Because with the responsibility to lead comes the authority to be able to lead. And he does that. He invests governments with authority right here in our Bibles by telling us to submit to them.

So this is God saying, listen, I need to give government authority to do what it's meant to do. And so you must listen to them. You must submit to them. Now, the implication, of course, is that because governments are God's idea, they carry God's authority, not just man's authority, that governments actually carry some of the authority of God.

And that's what Paul writes next. Have a look at verse 2. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

So in other words, to ignore or oppose this, to not recognize the authority of governments, is essentially to oppose God himself.

[10 : 27] And so we are called to respect and uphold the institution of governments, even if particular governments don't function like they should. Like with a marriage.

Think of a marriage, for example, which, by the way, God also came up with. Marriage is not our idea, like people today think it is, and so they can change it to suit themselves. No, marriage is God's idea.

It's an institution in human society that God has established to be the foundation of families. And so we are called to uphold and respect the institution of marriage, even if particular marriages don't work, right?

Even if they don't function like they should. We don't throw away the idea of marriage because some people mess it up. And in the same way, we don't throw away the idea of government just because people mess it up.

And so government is God's idea. And therefore, political authority comes from God. We've got to get that straight. But just because political authority comes from God doesn't mean that we can't decide who holds that authority, which is exactly what we do in a democracy.

[11 : 39] We elect our leaders. So again, just like marriage, just because marriage is God's idea doesn't mean we don't get to choose who to marry. I mean, in history, of course, some people didn't get to choose who to marry, just like some people didn't get to choose who governs over them.

However, when we do get to choose, it's a very important choice who to marry, isn't it? Because it's a divine institution. And likewise, with government, because political authority comes from God, we must carefully choose people to govern who will best achieve the purposes for which God designed government.

And so that's our role in a society, to be good citizens as Christians, to uphold the institution of government and to vote wisely, not just to have no part in it, not to say, well, that's not for me, or to say that's going to make no difference.

We've actually got a responsibility to pursue and uphold good government. But that actually leads to the next question, which is, well, what is the purpose of government? If you and I are called to choose leaders that are meant to uphold the purposes for which God designed government, what are those purposes?

What should we be looking for? Well, that's exactly what Paul goes on to tell us next. And that is that governments exist to promote good and to restrain evil. Have a look at verse 3.

[13 : 01] So here, in summary, is God's purpose for government.

And notice there's no mention of welfare grants, of state control of essential services, or any of the thousand other things that states might be involved in today. It's up to us to decide really how much involvement our governments have in those areas.

Rather, though, Paul focuses on the primary core reason that God has established governments in human societies. And that is to commend and encourage citizens to do right. That is to act in a way that benefits our neighbors.

And to prevent and discourage citizens from doing wrong. That is acting in a way that harms our neighbors. That is the core role of government.

And, of course, governments will do this in many ways. But primarily, this is done through the justice system, the courts, the judges, and through the police, who enforce the laws of the justice system.

[14 : 22] And we learn here that God has given, in verse 4 there, the sword to those authorities for this purpose. In other words, government authorities have the ability to mediate God's punishment on wrongdoing, including death for serious crimes, which the sword implies.

Now, the Bible, of course, assures us that God himself will punish one day, ultimately. He will punish all sin, once and for all. He will hold all people to account for how they have lived.

But in the interim, you see, God has appointed governments as the legitimate means of restraining and punishing evil. Not to the extent that he will do one day. It's almost as if the justice that we see in our societies, flawed and broken as it is, is a little foreshadow of the ultimate justice to come.

And it's enough to hold back the influence of evil over society so that we can live in relative peace.

And we've got a lot to be thankful for in our society. If you look at human history, I mean, the amount of peace that we have, despite all the problems in our government, the fact that we can live in relative peace, the fact that we can walk to the shops without fear of being attacked by some enemy, is a great blessing.

We should be thankful for it. And it's because of government. It's because of structures in our society. And government, to the extent that it can, holding back evil.

[15 : 53] And that really brings us to the key implication in this passage for ourselves. Because secretly, this passage actually tells us something about ourselves, doesn't it?

If you concentrate on it. If we read it and look into it. Paul is not just talking about governments and our role as citizens. He's talking about us. You see, the key implication is that we need governments to do this, to promote good and restrain evil, because we're incapable of doing it ourselves.

You see how this is actually telling us about ourselves? That's what this passage is hinting at. I mean, if it were possible for humans to do good and avoid evil by ourselves, we wouldn't need government.

And so basically, to understand our need for governments, we need to look inwards and understand our own tendency to do evil, to sin. Our own inability to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong.

But we typically don't see ourselves like that, do we? We like to think we're decent, good, upstanding people. We like to think that we, in ourselves, have the ability to form a utopian society.

[17 : 08] I don't know if you've ever watched Star Trek. I'm a big Star Trek fan. Gene and I still are going now through the Next Generation Captain Picard episodes right from the first season.

But the thing about Star Trek, it's set in the 24th century, and they live in a utopian society. There's no money. There's no crime. Everybody's got a role to play in society. Everything's great. All the problems and wars of the human past have been resolved, and it's great.

It's actually a manifesto of secular humanism. This idea that humans can, in and of ourselves, create this utopian society.

Well, what we read here in Romans 13 is that's rubbish. That's not the case. You see, if left to ourselves, we wouldn't be able to get along just fine.

The truth is, history shows us that we can't form a utopian society without government, to a certain extent, restraining our evil. In every occasion that government power has lapsed in history, it has opened the door to violence, looting, murders, and all forms of evil by the people who wouldn't think of doing those things otherwise.

[18 : 19] You see stories of people looting shops and beating up other people who were upstanding citizens the day before, who were busy cooking food for their kids the day before.

They seemed to be good people, but suddenly government power, this restraint, steps back, and all forms of evil come out of even the most decent-looking people. People do it just because they can.

That's the potential that exists inside each one of us. It's pretty scary. And it exposes that we as humans are much more evil, given the opportunity, than we think we are.

And that is a realistic view of ourselves. One of the ways that our minds are to be renewed is to realize that we're worse than we think we are. And it's not comfortable.

Like Adrian said earlier, we don't come here for comfortable truths. We're being challenged with uncomfortable truths, especially about ourselves. It's like sin is bubbling under our thin veneer of civilization, just waiting for the opportunity to flow out.

[19 : 21] And it does. It kind of, even within civilized society, in our relationships, when no one notices, in our thoughts, in our words, our sin flows out. And we've got to realize that.

And we've got to realize that that's why we need government to restrain that sin from coming out in full force, even if we don't think we do. And in fact, our natural resistance to having a government tell us what to do, because let's admit, we all kind of naturally resist that.

We resist being told what to do. That is an expression of us not wanting God telling us what to do. You see, we're anti-authority by nature.

That's why we resist government. But really, we're anti-authority because we resist God by nature. And we're all guilty of that. The Bible says we've all turned away.

The Bible says we've all gone astray from God's laws, God's instructions for our lives. We live lives the way we think we should, not the way God thinks we should. Not because of a failure of government.

[20 : 34] You see, societies don't work like they should, not because government has failed, but because we have. But because of our own sinful hearts. You see?

So, let me put it this way. The problem with society is not out there. We think it is. We look on the news, and we see problems in society, and we blame, what do we blame?

We blame our government. We blame our president. We blame all, everything except ourselves.

The problem, though, with society is not out there. It's in here. The problem in South Africa is not Jacob Zuma stealing our taxes, which is unfortunate, yes.

But, the real problem is that we need to pay taxes in the first place because we wouldn't look after the poor with our own money if left to ourselves. And we wouldn't do good without a justice system telling us to do good.

And therefore, because of our own sin, even a bad government is preferable to no government at all. As Dr. Secom puts it, even a tyrant is better than no ruler, for no ruler means a multitude of tyrants.

[21 : 41] See, we would all be tyrants if left to ourselves. And so we need government to restrain the results of us ignoring God. And that's the point of this passage.

But, there's something we need even more than governments to restrain our evil, and that is Jesus Christ. You see, without Him, without Jesus, and without His death on the cross for sins, we would all have to pay one day for our rebellion against God's authority in our lives, which we all rebel against by nature.

It's Jesus, you see, who comes, and not only does He pay for our sins on our behalf when we put our trust in Him, but then, as we've been seeing in Romans, it's then that He transforms us from the inside out.

He changes us, and He helps us to now, in this life, end our rebellion and come back to our rightful authority joyfully in obedience to God.

He undoes our anti-authority, and He helps us to come back to trust the right authority in our lives and to obey God so that we can one day be part of God's perfect society because of Jesus.

[22 : 55] And so, this idea of utopia, of this perfect society, we can't form it ourselves, but we have this idea because it will happen. We know, we know this world is not like it's meant to be.

Even though we've never seen a better world, but we know there is such a thing as a better world, and it's true. The Bible tells us there is. The Bible tells us that's the society that God is preparing to establish for eternity with no suffering, no death, no pain, no crime, no selfishness, no sin, and He wants you and me to be part of that, but for that to happen, Jesus needed to come.

Jesus needed to die for our sins. Jesus needed to open the door for us to come back to our rightful authority before that society can be established. And one of the many ways, Paul says here, that we express those renewed minds, we express that new attitude to authority, is by submitting to the earthly authorities that God has established in the interim, instead of thinking that we can rule ourselves.

And so he says in verse 5, therefore it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also as a matter of conscience. In other words, so in conclusion, he's saying be subject to the laws of the land, not just because you'll get caught if you don't, not just because of possible punishment, but also as a matter of conscience.

In other words, even if you won't get caught when you do something against the law, something like copying music illegally, for example, people don't get caught for doing that, and yet it infringes copyright laws that the government has established, or exceeding the speed limit when there are no cameras around.

[24 : 35] Not just slowing down when we see a camera in the distance, back down to the speed limit, but actually upholding the speed limit. You see, even then, when we won't get caught, we are called to uphold the country's laws.

Why? Well, because of conscience, because we know it's the right thing to do, because God has established those authorities, and us submitting to those laws is a way that we submit to God's authority over us, and it's a way that we witness to those around us who want to defy the government.

And then Paul ends with a very practical application that we don't want to hear. Verse 6, pay your taxes. You see, if governments are God's idea, then civil servants are actually servants of God. There's no mistake that we call them ministers. Whether or not they acknowledge that they're ministers, they're ministering God's work, just the same as a minister in a church.

And they're doing an important service, and so we should support them. We should pay for them to do their work so that they can spend their full time making sure that the government is functioning and the country is functioning.

[25 : 51] We should give them the respect and honor that is due their position, remembering that they too are going to be held accountable for the role that God has given them, whether or not they know it.

And so we need to help them, right? Given that we know that they're going to stand before God and they're going to answer for how they use their role, how they use their authority, we should help them, not least of all by praying for them.

Because if Christians aren't praying for Jacob Zuma, who is? If Christians aren't praying for our government and our magistrates and our municipalities, who is?

praying that they will have the ability and the will, despite their own sin, to promote good and to restrain evil. And so next time you feel the need to moan about your government, perhaps it's wise to stop and ask when last you prayed for your government and to do that instead.

And with that, let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it not only gives us practical application for life day to day, but it reveals what is true about ourselves.

[27 : 05] That in your word you put up a mirror so that we can see ourself in truth. Thank you, Lord, for renewing our minds this morning in this topic. Thank you for helping us have renewed thinking not just about our governments but about ourselves.

Lord, help us to respond that help us to pray for our governments. Lord, we pray that you would continue as we go out into this next week to transform our thinking, to see ourselves in truth and to stop resisting to your authority over us.

Help us, Lord, to recognize and submit to our rightful authority and to do so joyfully. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.