

TJW, HT, 2.5.10, 9.15am & 11am

General Election Special: Romans 13.1-7

In case you hadn't noticed, there's a General Election on Thursday. Some of us will be quite interested in it all: the TV debates between the party leaders - the first prospect of a hung Parliament in 35 years - and maybe a change to the old two-party system.

Others of us maybe wishing for it all to end: we've grown disenchanted with all politicians - we can't see any major differences between the parties - and we're not sure if we'll bother to vote.

Now I'm preaching on the Election this morning because in the Bible God says some direct and startling things about human governments. If you're a Christian, this should wake you up, whether or not politics excites you - because for the Christian when God speaks we will want to listen and learn and change.

Let me tell you what this sermon won't do for you - just so you're not expecting the wrong things. It won't tell you who to vote for, or even make hints about that, because in the Bible God doesn't tell us that.

It won't even give you principles to make it easy for you to decide who to vote for.

But let me show you what it will give you, if you've got a mind to listen to God, and a heart that wants God to speak to you.

Turn with me to the passage I'm preaching on - Romans chapter 13. This is the longest single section in the whole NT on governments and citizens. That's why I've chosen it.

Now turn back a page, to the beginning of this section in this part of Paul's letter to the Romans - chapter 12, verse 1 [READ verses 1-2].

The world has patterns that it wants to impose on us about how we think about everything - including how we think about governments. It wants us to conform.

But if we're Christians God wants to give us a renewed mind, a transformed heart. Our first Value here at HT is: "Everyone Transformed by Christ". And today that transformation is going to touch the way we think and feel about government - that's government right across the board, of whichever party: in our country, in our county, and in our town.

A couple of week ago Erica and I were driving across Leicestershire for a day out. It was the first warm sunny day of the year. We said to each other: "Isn't it pretty round here." Then we said: "But maybe the sunlight is making everywhere look better - transforming how everything looks."

When the light of God's Word shines into our lives, it will change our attitude to everything. So let's pray...

Back in Romans 13 there is one central command to Christians, in relation to their government. It's in verse 1 [READ verse 1a]. It's repeated in verse 5 [READ verse 5a]. The command is: **Submit to those who govern.**

That command goes massively against the culture and the times - against the mould that the world around us wants to squeeze us into. Any Christian who wants to take this seriously is going to be out of line with the attitude their friends have to the governing authorities. I'm going to say more at the end of this sermon about how we obey this in the specifics and the practicalities right now. But for now let's keep our noses in the transforming view of government God wants to give us.

Submission means this: recognise your place in the hierarchy; acknowledge that there are governing authorities who have the right to govern you.

Let's be very clear here: the word used is 'submit', and that's not the same as the word 'obey'. When governments command Christians to do things that are contrary to God's word, then our allegiance is first of all to the Lord, come what may.

In 1957 the white South African government put forward a law to forbid people of different races meeting together in "church, school, hospital, club or any other institution or place of entertainment." The Archbishop of Cape Town wrote to the government: "I will be unable to obey this law or to counsel my clergy and people to do so."

He was dead right to do so.

So submission is not blind obedience.

What it is is shown us in verse 7 [READ].

Submission means showing respect and honour to the governing authorities.

Now after the events in Parliament over the last year, our first reaction may be: “Our politicians don’t deserve honour and respect.”

But we cannot take refuge in that. This was written by a man, the apostle Paul, who was kicked around and persecuted by the authorities in far worse ways than any of us have been. He lived under the autocratic Roman emperors, not a parliamentary democracy. He had far more reasons than us to think badly of government. And yet he still says: submit to the rulers. So the MPs’ expenses scandal, and politicians’ broken promises, and an abusive word spoken privately by the Prime Minister and picked up on a microphone - none of this gives us an excuse to wriggle out of this command to honour and respect to those who govern.

Submission also means paying our taxes with good grace - verse 7: “if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if you owe revenue (that is: indirect taxes), then pay it.”

We should pay our income tax, Council Tax, VAT, Inheritance Tax, Stamp Duty - all with good grace, to the governing authorities who have the right to demand it from us. We can’t obey verse 7 from the

heart while constantly moaning about taxes and spending our time looking for loopholes to allow us to pay less tax.

Submission to governing authorities means respect and honour; it means paying our taxes with good grace.

It means something else, too - and to see that, keep your finger here in Romans and turn on to 1 Timothy chapter 2.

Paul's dealing with the same kind of topic here - chapter 2, verse 1 [READ verses 1-2].

We show our submission to those in authority by praying for them and thanking God for them. For myself, this is not a big feature of my own prayer-life - but God says here that it should be.

When our wheelie-bins are emptied for us - when flowers are planted in our local park - when we get cancer treatment far faster and better than most of the world's population - when our children and grandchildren get free education - when all this and so much else is made possible by our governing authorities, we Christians must show our respect for them by praying for them, and thanking God for them.

The key command to Christians with their government is: submit respectfully to them.

Then Paul gives two reasons why this is his key command.

The first is this: submit to those who govern, because **God established them.**

Back in Romans 13, see verse 1 again [READ].

In his creation, God has established authority structures for our own good.

There are authority structures in the family, with parents supposed to be exercising authority over children.

We all know that children don't grow up to be mature and content if there's no authority over them.

There are authority structures are in the church, as leaders exercise spiritual authority and discipline.

And there are authority structures in the world, with governing authorities to give us an ordered and peaceful society.

Of course we human beings too often abuse the authority that God gives us - but the authority he gives is good.

Obviously this doesn't mean that every Hitler and Stalin was directly appointed by God - because each government can choose evil paths if it wants to - and when they do Christians must resist them.

Now, bad things will happen if we forget that authority has ultimately been put there by God - see verse 2 [READ].

God's anger and judgment will come on people who won't accept that government is God-given.

Submit to governing authorities, because God has established them.

And - the second reason - submit to those who govern **because they're God's servants to promote good, and to punish evil.**

Listen to what verse 3 says [READ verses 3-4].

People in authority are God's servants.

It so happens that Gordon Brown and David Cameron have said they believe in God in some way, and Nick Clegg has said he doesn't.

But throughout Bible-history, God has used kings and governors as his instruments for his purposes, whether or not they acknowledge him. He's the same God, and that's still how he works.

And they are God's servants to promote good and punish evil.

Every time a road is repaired to make it safe - every time a criminal is jailed - an elderly person is able to buy food because their state pension has been paid - a new hospital is built - every time the nation is defended against a hostile force that wants to attack us... every time the governing authorities make any of these things happen, God is at work through them for our good.

OK, we may happen to dislike some of the details: we may not like the way the government chooses to defend our national security, or we may think that a new hospital has been built in the wrong place - but God urges us here to face up to all the ways he is at work, through the governing authorities, for our good.

If our basic attitude to governing authorities is to moan and carp and find fault - if we won't acknowledge the good they promote and the evil they punish - then it's God we're thumbing our nose at. We're refusing to acknowledge his goodness to us.

That is God's word to us on how we should relate to governing authorities:

Submit to them, because God has established them, and they're his servants to promote good and punish evil.

In these last few minutes I've deliberately wanted us to rub our noses in this biblical teaching - because when you stand back and compare this Bible-teaching with the patterns and the attitudes that our world has to government, you can see how radically different they are.

You can see how a Christian will not be able to go along happily agreeing with so much that their unbelieving friends and neighbours will say about politicians between now and Thursday.

Now, with Thursday's election coming up, let me ground this by saying three things that follow from this Bible-teaching.

First, nothing that the Bible says here will guide you clearly to vote for one candidate or another.

You could vote for the party who you think will do the greatest good as God's servants in government.

You could vote for the local candidate who you think will serve us with the greatest integrity. That's all fine.

But in this particular election there's one extra thing we must say - and it's about the BNP.

The leaflet for the BNP that was pushed through my letter-box claims that it is the party that will “protect our Christian values” - and indeed the BNP has attempted to attract Christian voters.

Now virtually every major Christian denomination and grouping in this country has said publically that the policies and beliefs of the BNP are calculated to bring not peace but discord and unrest, and they are utterly at odds with Christian truth and Christian virtues. My own visit to the BNP website tells me that that’s right.

Here’s the second practical outcome, with Thursday in mind. Our attitude towards governing powers should be transformed into: respect, not cynicism.

Cynicism towards every kind of authority is a cancer in our Western culture. It eats away at the structures which God has given us for our own good.

Most days I look briefly at the online edition of 3 different newspapers. Every day in all of them I see accusations thrown around; insinuations made; leaders ridiculed. In one of them that’s 80-odd percent of the coverage.

Of course leaders should be held to account, and exposed when they have cheated and lied. But in our culture we have swung way too far into a cynicism which is ungodly and dishonouring to the Lord.

Reading the paper and watching the TV election coverage is a dangerous thing for a Christian to do, if we copy the attitudes to government that run through them every day. Respect, not cynicism.

The third practical outcome is another transformation of mind: love, not self-centredness.

The section on governments in Romans 13 is in the middle of a section all about love. Look at verse 8 [READ]. And look back at verse 21 of chapter 12 [READ].

So the section on governments is really about how Christians should exercise love in the way we relate to our government, and - for us - that means: how do I vote lovingly?

When most people stand there in the booth on Thursday, with that stubby little pencil on the end of a piece of string in their hand, how are they deciding how to vote? I'll tell what most people are asking: "Which party will look after people like me? Which Prime Minister will make me better off?"

Politicians know that's true. That's why they promise to make everybody richer and then end up breaking their promise - we demand it from them, if we're going to vote for them!

Surely this is the vital point, when we go to vote on Thursday, where our Christian faith should stand out. It's in our minds.

We should be asking not, "Who will protect my pension? Who will lower taxes for people like me?" - but instead, "Who will provide the most just government, as a servant of God, for the good of everyone who lives in this country?"

Being transformed in your mind... to submit to authorities - to swap cynicism for them, for respect - to ditch self-centredness in favour of

love - that transformation may not change how you vote. But maybe it will.