

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 21  
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl  
***The government is God's servant.***

Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God's institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves.

<sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to evil. Would you like to have no fear of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will receive praise from him, <sup>4</sup> because he is God's servant for your benefit. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because he does not carry the sword without reason. He is God's servant, a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience.

<sup>6</sup> For this reason you also pay taxes, because the authorities are God's ministers, who are employed to do this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay what you owe to all of them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed.

—Romans 13:1-7

God has all authority. Only he has all authority, and yet he divides out his authority to his representatives in the world. He divides his authority to people in the home, in the church, and in society. And today we focus on that third area as God delegates some of his authority to the government. In Paul's letter to the Romans, God is very clear. **"Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God."** Just do a quick mental exercise. Think of any type of authority in our world. Do you have something in mind? *That* authority has been established by God.

Sometimes we cringe at that, don't we? Just in the past 100 years we have seen some very corrupt world leaders who have used that authority to do some awful things.

Communist Russia, Communist China, and Nazi Germany eliminated an incredible amount of human life. Joseph Stalin was responsible for around 20 million deaths. Mao Zedong's regime is credited with a staggering 70 million deaths. Adolf Hitler comes in third with around 10 million murders attributed to his name. The twentieth century was the world's horrific experiment in seeing what intentionally godless governments would produce. And the result? The result was a century with more slaughter of human life than all other centuries combined.

And we've seen it even in our own country. Ever since the verdict of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, during the past 50 years, our government has sanctioned the killing of more than 35 million babies through abortion. Such atrocities! Governments in just the past 100 years have used their authority to do some horrible evils.

And then we read these words from the apostle Paul. **"Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God."** *All* authorities are established by God. And there are times when we cringe at that. We want to grab our erasers and change those words.

And not just once, not just twice, but three times throughout these seven verses in Romans 13 Paul says that **the government is God's servant**. And because of that, we owe submission and support, respect and honor to those in authority.

And that's tough sometimes, isn't it? I think you would agree that we have disagreements in our country. Is that an understatement? One thing I can tell you for sure is that every four years, on the Wednesday morning after the first Tuesday in November, millions of people will take to the airwaves and to the internet and declare, "That's not *my* president." People participate in social media tirades and start calling the leader of the free world degrading names. Bumper stickers are plastered on cars using a race car driver's name as slang for a very unchristian and disrespectful saying.

And then when the political pendulum swings in the other direction four or eight years later, that same Wednesday after the first Tuesday of the month of November, millions of people on the other side will come out and say the exact same thing, "That's not *my* president."

Really? Are you not a citizen of the United States of America? This is how our government is constituted. If you carry the votes of the electoral college, come election day, you are the president. Oh, that president may not be good. He may not be a good person. He may be corrupt in campaign or corrupt in character. He may not be fit to lead a military. But he still fits squarely with Romans 13 and as such, **"Everyone must submit to the governing authorities."** Why? **"For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God."**

Now, certainly, you and I are richly blessed to be citizens of these United States of America. We have experienced tremendous blessings from our God through our government. We can gather here today and worship in freedom. I have no fear that the police are going to storm into our church and shut us down. I can walk down the street wearing a T-shirt that boldly professes "Eyes on Christ." We have people who put their own lives at risk to protect us and our possessions from the sinful rebellion of others. We live in a country where we are tremendously blessed by our God.

So, I suppose this conversation would be more difficult if we lived in North Korea, huh? I don't mean to trivialize any corruption we see in our own government, but can you imagine what life would be like under the dictator of North Korea? How do Paul's words apply to that situation? Really? That guy who says there is no god except him alone, that guy who terrorizes those who do what is right because it's not what he wants, that guy who separates family for torture and forced labor, that guy is God's servant? Can you see why someone might be tempted to get out that Bible passage eraser and scratch out the words: "**For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God**"? Yes, even *that* government is God's servant.

You know, it helps a lot that God gives us examples of these Romans 13 principles in action all over the Bible. We listened a little earlier to Daniel 1. In 605 B.C. the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, attacked the capital city of God's people, Jerusalem. God's people were under attack. Nebuchadnezzar ransacked the temple. He stole a bunch of the items from the temple and put them in the temple of his own god as a way of saying, "My god is stronger than your God."

He stole children from their parents. Among them were four guys named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. We know those last three better by the Babylonian names that the king imposed on them: Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. They didn't vote for Nebuchadnezzar. They didn't have a say as to who would be their king.

He became their king by an act of violence and cruelty, and later he would pay for that. But in the meantime, he was still their king. And as their king, they paid him what they owed him. They gave "**taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed.**"

They submitted themselves to the governing authority. To submit means to act in accordance with the position that you have under someone's responsibility and authority. It includes honor and respect, but keep this in mind: it does not require blind obedience in every matter.

We can see this play out among Daniel and his friends. In Daniel 1, we see that the king was placing food before them that was defiled, food that God had forbidden them from eating. They weren't going to do that. Now that doesn't mean they went ahead and said, "You're not our king." No, instead they had some wit and came up with this clever idea that would permit them to obey both God and the government. And like we heard in the first reading, pretty soon everybody in the royal cafeteria was eating vegetables. God took care of them. But that doesn't mean that life was always smooth sailing for God's people.

Two chapters later in Daniel, the king makes a rule that every one of his officials either must bow down and worship a 90-foot-tall gold statute or get thrown into a fiery furnace. And Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego said, "Sorry, king. You are our king, and we respect you. But we must obey God rather than men. We are not going to do that even if it means the fire." They were respectful, but they would only worship the true God. They recognized that they could lose their lives at the hands of a government.

And then a few chapters after that in Daniel, another king issues a decree that whoever prays to anything other than the king himself will get thrown into the lion's den. So, Daniel hears that edict, and what does he do? He marches home, he goes to his room, and he prays to the one true God.

If you have gone to Sunday School, you know how those events turned out. Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego get thrown into the fiery furnace, but not a single hair on their heads gets singed. Daniel gets thrown into the lion's den, but an angel keeps the mouths of the lions closed and Daniel lives. God took care of his people in the midst of a pagan government. God always takes care of his people, but that doesn't necessarily mean things will be easy for his people and always happy in this world.

Centuries later a family line bears the name Herod. They have authority which was established by God. The first Herod killed all the little boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to wipe out the King of the Jews, baby Jesus. And his son Herod is the one who chopped off the head of John the Baptist and put it on a platter. And his grandson is the one who put Jesus' apostle James to death with the sword and threw Peter into prison. That's the kind of stuff that was going on in governments, in the era when God had Paul write these words in Romans 13.

And God through his apostle says, "**The government is God's servant.**" The government is *God's* servant. Not the other way around. No. As the one who establishes governments, God is ultimately in control. That doesn't make him the author of corruption or tyranny. But it does mean that he is finally in control, and no matter how much they may rage against his will and oppress his people, God can make even the worst government serve his good purposes. You know this to be true.

An innocent man stands before a ruler who has the authority to execute him or set him free. And everybody knows that this guy is innocent, and the charges are a sham. People know it, especially, the people who are bringing the charges and the guy who has the authority to execute or set him free.

But this ruler is a bad man. He is a bad leader. He's more concerned about his career than justice. But you don't see Jesus tearing off his crown of thorns and throwing it down on Pilate's head. You don't see Jesus riling up the crowds to turn against their Roman occupiers. What does Jesus do?

Jesus speaks the truth about authority. **"You would have no authority over me at all if it had not been given to you from above."** And when the cowardly governor finally gives in to the cries to crucify him, Jesus goes. He doesn't speak foul words against Pilate. He goes like a sheep before the shearers; he did not say a word.

My friends, that was the most atrocious crime in the history of the world. No doubt about it. Pontius Pilate orders the execution of God. And the robust Roman soldiers carry out the order. But who is in control?

God accomplishes the greatest act of good through the most atrocious act of evil, and justice is served. Not for crimes that Jesus has committed, but through this, Jesus pays for the crimes we have committed. Paul is right. **The government is God's servant.** Not the other way around.

Just think about what that means for us as we enter another presidential election one year from now. Oh, I think we can get pretty riled up about politics. So much so, that an outward observer who didn't know anything about us might conclude that God is the *government's* servant. Do we ever give that wrong impression? Do we ever give the impression that if we don't get the right people in authority, then God won't be able to do his job? And then, if things do not go our way, do we get so riled up that we spout words of dishonor and disrespect for those in authority? Do we take to social media and call names and spew forth disrespect? My friends, that is not what God wants us to do.

And I'm not saying that we should just shrug off the responsibilities that God has given to us as citizens in this country. No. Not at all. God has given us the privilege of engaging in our government. As informed citizens of these United States of America we have a voice and a vote. We campaign and communicate. We discuss and debate. But as followers of Jesus, we do so with great respect and honor. We still give thanks for the protections and temporal blessings God gives through government.

And then at the end of the day, whether things go our way or not, we submit to the governing authority, recognizing that **"no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God."** God has all authority. He is still in control and still delegates his authority to governments for his purposes.

And remember that you are not just a citizen of these United States of America. You are a redeemed, forgiven child of the Lord of all nations. You are a citizen of heaven. God accomplished your salvation through a Roman governor who didn't give a care about Jesus. God is in control. And he'll bring you the rest of the way to your eternal home no matter who is sitting in the oval office or who is making laws or who is making court decisions. God will accomplish his purposes. So, remember, **the government is God's servant for your benefit.** Amen.