

Debt of Honour

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Grab a seat. Well, you have heard the passage read, and I guess it's shocking in many ways, isn't it?

And it raises lots of alarm bells go off on your head. You're thinking, well, that quite can't be right. And what about this scenario? And what about that? And what about when this happens? Not only is it difficult to understand this passage, it's been horribly misused in the past.

Let me give you an example. Michael Cassidy, who you may have heard of, he was the founder of African Enterprise, which was involved in training Christian leaders on that continent.

And in 1985, he launched something called the National Initiative for Reconciliation in South Africa. So he started that off right in the guts of apartheid, right in the middle of apartheid.

And his goal was to try and bring both sides to the table, to try and get some conversation happening, and make some headway. So he launches this initiative and makes a little bit of headway, in fact, gets an appointment with P.W. Botta, who was the prime minister of South Africa at the time.

[1 : 2 9] So in 1985, October the 8th, as recorded in one of his books, he walks into the office, hoping to see some signs of repentance.

He walks into the office. Botta remains standing, opens up his Bible, and reads Romans 13, 1-7 to him, and then dismisses him.

And it's not the first time this passage has been used to support unjust political systems.

I know the churches in Nazi Germany, some of them, used it to garner support for Hitler. So I've spent a week in this text, and it's a really, really important passage to get your head around.

Not only because it's been used poorly in the past, but also because it speaks to two really important relationships in your life, in your world.

[2 : 4 0] The first one, the relationship between the church and the state. And secondly, your relationship to the state. When I say state, I'm talking about the government.

So let's begin. Now what I want to do in looking at this passage is I want to start way up here with a little bit of political theory, and then we'll slowly zero in on the passage, and we'll look at it line by line.

First, way up here, a little bit of light political theory for your Sunday enjoyment. Okay, so over the years, the relationship between the state and the church has been notoriously dodgy, as you could probably guess.

There's been four main ways the church and the state have related to each other. The first way you would call Erastinianism.

I'm pronouncing it perfect. Erastinianism. Okay? And that is where the state controls the church. I've been trying to think of examples of this.

[3 : 52] Perhaps modern-day China. There is a state church in China. The government gets to choose who is bishops or not. It's not a perfect example, but that's one example.

Erastinianism. The state controls the church. The second way the state and the church have related is theocracy. That is, the church controls the state. So an example of that would be the Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Vatican City as a nation-state, as a theocracy.

Third way they have related, Constantinianism. Constantinianism. And that is where the state favors the church, and the church favors a state.

So they sort of have this mutually beneficial alliance. Now, the obvious example is 4th century Rome under Constantine, the Christian emperor there. Modern-day examples are hard to find.

I think Finland has got sort of an interesting relationship with its state church there, whereby most members of the country, like 80% of the members of the country, are members of the church.

[4 : 59] The church can tax corporations, and in return, the church has to do, bury and marry anyone. So not a perfect example. That's one of them. Okay, the fourth way the church and the state have related, partnership.

This is where the church and the state have different roles. And they recognize they have different roles. And that is my basic assumption as I head into this text, because I think that this is what Paul has in mind in Romans 13.

The church and the state are about different things. They have distinct functions, and importantly, God has meant it to be that way. All right, let's zoom in a little bit closer now.

So we're up here. We're going to come a little bit closer. Let's look at the context of this passage. What's the stuff around it? Some people might, I mean, if you just read Romans 12 through, you might go, goodness, that's abrupt.

It feels like it's sort of a, it just all of a sudden, Paul changes directions really quickly. He's talking about loving your enemies, and then all of a sudden he's talking about paying your taxes, and then all of a sudden he's talking about debauchery and sexual immorality.

[6 : 17] Now, some commentators have said, look, this is a weird diversion of Paul, and let's just accept that it's a bit of a weird diversion, but it's important. And those commentators are wrong.

It is not a weird diversion. It's not even a diversion. Paul is staying on track with his mission in Romans 12, which is to help explain to us, what does it mean to be a Christian in the real world?

Well, it means loving your enemies. It also means having a right attitude towards the government. It also means not being debauched.

So it makes absolute sense that the Bible would want to speak to this very important relationship, because your relationship with the government is a significant one. They take a lot of your money.

They tell you what to do in many ways. The Bible wants to shape a right attitude towards the government. Okay, a little bit closer to the text now.

[7 : 22] Let's look at the actual verses, but overview. Seven verses. Three sections. The first section is the first two verses.

That is about the authority of the government. The second section, three verses, that's 3, 4, 5, that is about the ministry of the government.

And I use that word purposefully, ministry of the government. The last bit, the last two verses, is about our response to those first two bits. So one, authority of government.

Two, ministry of government. Three, our response. Okay. We're in the text now. Seven verses is great, because we can go one by one.

Let me ask you, though, as we begin to look at these passages, to keep an open mind. All right. Verse one.

[8 : 26] Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Some of you right now are thinking, that's just not right.

That's not true. God wouldn't allow some governments to exist, surely. But what is it saying here?

It's saying that we submit to the authority of a government because their authority is from God. Wow. And it's shocking, isn't it? Verse two. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.

Really? Really? Is that what the Bible is teaching? Well, yes, it absolutely is. There is no way to sidestep this.

It's very clear what it's saying. But alarm bells are ringing in your heads right now because you are thinking to yourself, yes, Aaron, but what about Muammar Gaddafi?

[9 : 34] What about Adolf Hitler? What about, you know, insert despot at this point? What about those guys? Are we supposed to submit to them?

Okay. Here is a way of looking at this passage, which I think is right. This passage is dealing with general principles.

So don't get caught up in extreme examples. Although, when I say that, don't soften it too much.

Don't be in your head thinking, yes, submit to authorities that are 100% perfect. Yes, of course, you know. Think about the political context that Paul was writing in here. I mean, he was, he was, he was Jewish and occupied people under Roman rule.

The emperor was Nero and he wasn't a nice Christian man. But Paul is saying, submit to the authority. So what is the general principle here?

[10 : 43] What is Paul saying? Here's what I think he's saying. Life is impossible without the rule of law. And the rule of law is enforced by the government.

And it's impossible because of the fall. Now, the fall is a term used to describe the point where humanity chose to ignore God and do their own thing.

The result being that sometimes people do bad things. Now, it is God's plan to bring the world back to himself through Christ. I think we all believe that, right?

It's God's plan to do that. But in the meantime, so that things don't fall apart completely, so it's not total anarchy, so it's not a total write-off, God providentially set up the state.

God providentially allowed civilization to develop to keep things like aggression and our selfishness in check, to protect the weak from the strong, to combat the effects of the fall.

[11 : 57] Now, this is not saying, here's where you need to look at this passage in terms of what it's not saying, okay? It is not saying that God thinks Stephen Harper is the best prime minister Canada could ever have, okay?

It is not saying that. It does not validate the actions of any particular leader, but rather, what the passage is saying is that it's in God's plan that some form of government exists in a world where evil exists.

That does not necessarily follow that God approves of the actions of all leaders all over the world. We are to respect the institution of government because it's God's idea and it's a really good one.

It helps to organize society. As C.S. Lewis says, it enables one to partake in one of the great things in life, a cup of tea by the fire.

But let's address this question, what happens when a state is really corrupt? What do we do though? What if we do where the country where we live says things which counteract the laws of God?

[13 : 25] What happens when the laws of the world are in opposition to the laws of God? Well the Bible gives us examples of this.

We are to disobey. Probably the most famous examples are when Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn babies and the midwives disobeyed.

When a law was put in place under Nebuchadnezzar that all need to bow down to worship him, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused. Peter and his boys were preaching about Jesus in Acts.

The authorities told them to stop preaching Jesus. They ignored them. And in fact they asked them, what are you doing? We told you you shouldn't do that. And in Acts 5 they said we must obey God rather than man.

So, when we take the whole counsel of God into consideration it is fair to say that obedience to the state is contingent.

[14 : 33] And that sometimes disobedience is appropriate and even our Christian duty. So, in sum, so far, these first two verses.

There are many failures in state, it is true, but that does not undermine the principle that mankind needs to be ruled by government this side of heaven and that's God's idea and it's a good idea.

It's like marriage. Marriages fail, but marriage is still God's idea and it's something we should support and believe in and hope for and pray for. Okay, let's keep moving.

The next section, this little section is on the function of government and here is where it gets a little bit hairy, alright? an open mind.

This is three to five. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive approval.

[15 : 33] For he is God's servant for your good, but if you do wrong, be afraid. For he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the evildoer.

Therefore, one must be in subjection not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. Two functions of government clearly outlined here.

One, reward good. Two, punish evil. Let's deal with the punishing evil one first, okay? Let's get that one out of the way. Alright, when the state punishes evil, it is functioning as a servant of God's anger.

I'll say it again. When the state punishes evil, it is functioning as a servant of God's anger. So it's very dramatic, doesn't it? I've got my in-laws staying with me at the moment, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law.

They're up on a holiday and their little girl, Hannah. And so they came to St. John's this morning at the 9 a.m. service with my wife and I said to them, listen, just so you know, I'm preaching this morning and it's a kind of a heavy text that doesn't lend itself to the comedic treatment.

[16 : 50] And I will be saying some quite heavy things. For example, I may say something like this, when the state punishes evil, it is functioning as a servant of God's anger.

And my wife said, Aaron, you cannot say that. Do not say that in church. It's too heavy. You've got to, she said to me, Aaron, you've got to soften that up a little bit.

And here's the thing, I thought I had. This was like, this is my soft version, you know. I'm just saying really gently what the passage is saying and listen to how it says it.

In verse 4, this is the state, an avenger, who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. And this is, and we can't, we can't write this off as this little, you know, Paul got really carried away at one point and was like, oh, I'm really fired up here, I'm going to say something crazy and radical and I'm so angry about, you know, somebody stole my camel or something and I'm, oh, punish the wrongdoer, evil, you know.

No. This is sprinkled throughout the passage. This idea of God's judgment, God's anger with wrongdoing.

[18 : 16] Let me read out some of the words in the passage, sprinkled throughout the passage here. Judgment. You can see it in your own, see it in your Bible, say judgment, terror, fear, bear the sword, avenger, wrath, wrath, wrath again.

Okay, what's it saying here? What's it saying here? Let me put it up to you maybe slightly more gently.

Okay, God's wrath, God's wrath. I don't know how you say it here. I'm going to go both ways. It's not, it's not, it's not, it's not all saved up for judgment day.

God is not, it's all, it's not just all there waiting to come out on judgment day, which I hope you believe in. It's actually sometimes gradually is meted out upon us through the ministry of the state in judging people.

That's what a judge does. I was talking to David Short about this. he went to visit a friend of his who's a judge and halfway through a case they went for a meeting out the back.

[19 : 38] The judge said to David, come out to my chambers during a little, what do you call it, a little intercession, a little recess, you know. And the judge said to David, do you know what I do for a job? I judge.

God's ordained that. That's part of God's plan. It's the job of the state to do that. Meet out part of God's judgments gradually.

Now we as individuals are not authorized to take the law into our own hands. I hope you know that. We are not called to be vengeful. And this is Romans 12, isn't it?

Romans 12, 19. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. We can't be vengeful. God can, and it's his right to do it, and it's a good thing he does it, because he is a good God, and a God who is filled with justice.

God can do it, and the government is his tool for doing that. So we support the government, not just because we are nice, but because it administers the justice of God, and that is a good thing.

[20 : 54] And in fact, according to this passage, it is one of the major functions of the government. Yes, Aaron, you say, yes, yes, yes, but what about love?

What about forgiveness? What about all that good stuff that Jesus taught? This is not an opposition to that. We can't avenge ourselves, you know, that's true.

We're about forgiveness, but the government is about justice. We're about radical love and forgiveness, but the government is about justice.

Let me give you an example to show how these things can come together because you might think they're bumping up against each other in an uncomfortable way, but they're not. So, my wife and I went down to Bellingham, we're just out of Bellingham actually.

There is a ministry down there, a Christian ministry, where they work with people on the margins of society, and their particular ministry is to migrant workers.

[22 : 06] They're a group in the states that are often vilified, and anyway, they're having a rough time. Okay, migrant workers.

So we go down there to visit this ministry because we think this sounds awesome, you know, a radical expression of love there. So we go down to visit them, we arrive, and the guy who runs it says, listen, we need to go straight to the courts, because one of the people we've been working with, it would appear murdered somebody, and we're going to court.

So we went to court, and the young man that had murdered somebody, likely murdered somebody, was up the front, in chains, being cross-examined, you know, cross-examined by the lawyers, and you know on a wedding day in a church you have the groom side and the bride side, that people sit, do we still do that?

Yeah, okay. Well we all poured in, about 20 of us, we all sat on the defendant's side, in support of the defendant. In support meaning, not saying you shouldn't be up there, not saying you didn't do a bad thing.

See, we are called to love, and this community was loving this young man, had forgiven this young man, supporting his family, was helping to pay for his legal fees, but no one was saying he shouldn't be up there, no one was saying he shouldn't go to jail.

[23 : 27] Remember the assertion I came with right at the start? The government and the church are about different things. They're not in opposition, they just have distinct responsibilities, and we are to submit to that.

Okay, we're almost finished here. Let's look at the nice part, the rewarding good. So the government is about punishing evil, rewarding good, okay? We're not very good at that as a society.

We need to get better at that. Let me jump on my little hobby horse for just 30 seconds, all right? In New Zealand, we had a liberal government called the Labour government for 12 years, and they banished the conferring of knighthoods, because they said it was classist and elitist.

Now, I know you don't do that in Canada, I know you don't have that kind of thing, but we did have it in New Zealand, and it was banished. We have a new government, sort of centre-right, they have just reinstated knighthoods, and I don't know what you call it, dameships, damehoods, you know, they've just reinstated it, and I love it.

I think it's fabulous. And I'm not even like a royalist, I just think it's a great idea, it's a great way of a community honouring somebody, in a way that tracks with them the rest of their lives.

[24 : 49] Sir Richard Hadley, Sir Dame Cathazard, whatever. I love it, it's a great way of doing it, a great way of society rewarding people who have committed their lives to good works.

Okay, the last section, our practical response to the work and function of the government, verses 6 and 7. Read it with me here. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing.

Pay to all what is owed, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed. It says here we are to respect and honour state workers.

And not just sort of like a, ooh, good work, mate, good on you, well done. Have a look at these words here. See where it says minister in verse 6, minister, and in verse 4 it's got the word servant there.

You know those words are in Greek? My Greek pronunciation is terrible but diakonos liturgos, diakonos liturgos. You know what those could be translated to? Deacon and minister.

[26 : 07] I mean it's just telling us these people are servants of God. It's God's idea that we have a functioning government and the people who work for the government are servants of God.

God. So we should honor them with the same honor we give to ministers. So a teacher is serving God whether they know it or not.

A teacher is serving God. A policeman, a policewoman is serving God. The guy who collects your trash and your recycling is serving God. Open minds now.

Parking wardens, they are serving God. anyone that works in the state and in City Hall is serving God. Judges, public defenders are serving God.

These folks up here, I know some of you feel uneasy about having soldiers in a church. You shouldn't. Without giving examples of any particular war and working out whether it's just or not, the principle is that these people who are serving your country are actually serving God.

[27 : 13] And we should honor them for it. We should not only honor them, but we should pay them. And that is the last part, isn't it? You should pay your taxes. And don't see it as a gloomy thing where the government is trying to rip you off.

No. This is trying to shift our attitude. When you pay your taxes, you are participating in God's running of the world. And that's really good.

That's a good thing to participate in. Let me finish with a couple of thoughts here. St. Augustine said this. He said that the citizenship in the city of God should make us the very best citizens of the human city.

I mean, he's absolutely right. Citizenship in the city of God has made us the very best citizens of the human city. He's right. We should pay our taxes.

We should pay our parking fines. We should be respectful of those who collect them from us because they work for an institution which was God-ordained, which providentially developed in God's wisdom to protect us.

[28 : 24] And they are his servants whether they know it or not. Now you ask, where is Jesus in all of this? Well, of course, Jesus is on top and ahead and in front of all of this. And this is a thing that Romans, one of the big things Romans has been dealing with all along, isn't it?

What does union in Christ look like? Well, union in Christ, in this passage, looks like being a good citizen because any authority that the government has has been delegated to them by God under the headship of Christ.

And it's a good thing. And that, my friends, is what that passage is about. And with that, I rest my case.