

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Living Together
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1 Samuel 8:4-18; Romans 13:1-7

Before I read these verses, I want to build some contexts around the scripture. Oftentimes when we look at scripture we've heard before or we have heard used in a very specific way, we have a hard time hearing it in a new way. I want to free us up from some of those previous interactions so that we can truly hear it for today.

I want you to think for a second who you would trust more when making a purchase, a sales person or a friend. If a salesperson came to your door with a product trying to get you to buy it, there would be some added filters you would use as you listen to their sales pitch. There would probably be some skepticism as you listened because you knew they were receiving benefits from selling the product. You would probably ask lots of questions too to make sure they had good intentions. But if a friend came to you with a product that they loved, the filters of skepticism and questioning would probably fall away. This is because we already trust our friends to give us good information and know they want the best for us. Our friends are also not receiving any benefits from selling to us.

This is a problem that arose on the social media site Instagram. There were content creators who had accounts that were followed by hundreds of thousands of people. Their followers trusted these internet celebrities and logged in just to see what they were saying about issues. Companies saw these accounts and started to pay the content creators to promote their products. When the product was promoted people bought in hordes because they thought the recommendation was coming from a friend when in fact the person was being paid to sell the product; they were receiving a benefit to make the endorsement. Instagram eventually stepped in and made a rule that if a content creator was promoting a product because they were being paid, they had to be honest in their post about the benefits they were receiving. This does not mean the product placement stopped but it did mean that consumers had an honest experience with the product and could make a decision based on the reality of the quid pro quo.

This is similar to what Paul is doing in this text today. Paul is a friend talking about something he values and believes we should value too, but he is not outside of receiving benefits from the thing he's promoting. Paul is a Roman citizen. Now there were two ways to become a Roman citizen at this time. One way was to be born within the empire of Rome. The other way to become a Roman citizen was to buy your citizenship. This was an expensive endeavor but ultimately worth the price. ONLY Roman citizens could own land or make contracts with other citizens. If somebody robbed a citizen, they had the right to sue, they had the right to defend themselves in court if they were accused of something, and they could request that Caesar hear their case first hand. Only Roman citizens could run for civil or public office, they had special immunities from taxes and legal obligations. Citizens could not be tortured or whipped, they could not receive the death penalty unless they were guilty of treason and most important of all, they were the only ones who could vote. I should say here, women were allowed to be Roman citizens but were exempt from many of these benefits of citizenship. But Paul as a Roman citizen and a man was given all these things. When we hear Paul endorse the Roman government, we need to remember he speaks from a place of privilege. There were many more who could not afford citizenship and thus did not benefit from the Roman system of government.

One might wonder why Paul would participate in such an unjust system. Well, Paul does not think government or being a citizen is a bad thing or something to revoke. If you became a Roman citizen you were required to put aside the sense of the individual and focus on the good of the community. This ideal gave Paul hope that Christianity and Roman rule could coexist.

When Paul talks it is as a friend, but he is also a salesman who will continue to receive benefits if we buy into the system he promotes. We need to activate our skepticism and question the sales pitch. What Paul is talking about in Romans 13 is a message that was heard by two different types of people, citizens and non-citizens. We need to do the work of both sets of ears when we listen. We need to listen and hear what a citizen would hear, and listen to hear what a non-citizen would hear. So let's put on one of each of those ears and let us listen to Paul.

(read Romans 13: 1-7)

When we have these two types of people, these two different ears listening, we can hear how they would interpret this message very differently.

To the citizen, this all sounds great. They would be nodding their heads, yes, only criminals go to jail, only those who do wrong receive punishment. Paying taxes helps us all. The government is indeed ordained by God and obeying government is like obeying God. They hear Paul and feel proud of their system.

For the noncitizens, this is troubling. They realize Paul is trying to sell them on something that gives him great benefit. They have questions and skepticism. If those who do wrong get punished, why aren't they allowed to accuse those who wrong them? If the government rightly wields God's wrath, why are Roman citizens who murder noncitizens not tried for their crimes? If taxes should be paid, why do Roman citizens get tax breaks? They personally know people who have been innocent yet still received a punishment. They have been taken advantage of by citizens and had no way to seek justice. They ask, God has ordained this? The system's benefits are not trickling down to them and I'll bet they are not so keen to obey as Paul requests.

But they don't get mad at Paul because they also know he is a friend of theirs. Someone who uses his Roman status to help. They can hear in these last few verses their truth. Respect those who are due respect, and honor those who are due honor. The system is not perfect, and there are aspects that need amending. They hear Paul calling other Christians to use their privilege as Roman citizens to work and vote in a way that might help everyone one day receive the benefits. If there is a place that does not deserve respect, work to make it better. If there is a leader who does not deserve honor, use the vote to elect one that does. The citizens who stuck around to listen with both ears heard Paul's full message.

Unfortunately, many Christians only listen as a citizen and have used these verses to justify all kinds of horrific systems. Some of the articles I read this week made me so mad I wanted to rip this page out of every Bible I owned. The thing that saved my collection is that I do believe Paul is right, I just don't think Christians have heard him with both ears. We have listened as citizens, benefactors of the system, but not as outsiders. We hear these words, nod along in agreement and walk away before he gets to the part about giving respect and honor only when it is due. We miss that the system is not yet perfect and that we need to work to make it better for everyone in the community.

Paul sees how useful government can be. Because the Roman government exists, and he just so happened to be born on Roman soil, Paul lives an easier life. Not an easy life by any means, but it is easier as a citizen versus a noncitizen. What Paul does with that privilege is advocate for those benefits to be extended to more and more people. Paul affirms that government in and of itself is not innately bad, it is actually ordained by God. And we are called to work with the system God ordains to do the work of blessing the whole community.

In youth group, when we learn about commandments and God's law, we play a game called, "The game with no rules." We break out into groups of four and each group is given a standard deck of cards. Each player gets 5 cards

and is told the object of the game is to play all five cards. As for the rules, each player secretly thinks of a rule for how the cards need to be played. They do not tell anyone else what their rule is. Then they begin. As you can imagine the game is pretty slow. Every time someone tries to play a card that does not meet your rule you have to yell, “no!” and the play continues to the next player.

It's frustrating, maybe some people get a couple cards played but I have yet to see anyone win this game, it goes on and on and on with no one making much progress, and everyone yelling, “no!” at one another. When we don't know the rules, we have no idea how to play and have no chance of winning the game.

Laws help us know what is allowable. They free us up to do the things that are allowed, otherwise we live in fear that our next move will get us in trouble. God's law tells us no killing, no lying, respect your parents. We know how to function as God's people, and what is expected of us. God approves of governments because it is there to create and enforce the laws. Laws that free us up to live without fear of making a wrong move or being punished unjustly. God wants us to be free to live. The only way to be free is to know what is allowable in the community, otherwise we are stalemated and constantly yelling, “No!” at each other. We will never get anything done unless the rules are clear.

After the card games have stalled and everyone is frustrated, I tell the players to reveal their rules and try to play the game. This inevitably reveals that some of the rules are unfair. Here are some of my favorites rules I've had kids make up:

- One rule was you could only play a card with your left hand. Seemingly innocent, but this left handed student knew their right handed peers would never do it.
- I've seen the rule, only red cards can be played. Guess what that student's hand was made up of?
- Another rule was only someone with their name could play a card. Blatantly, diabolically unfair.

There are always rules that end up being oppressive to other players. These rules make it more likely for one person to win the game, versus another. Sometimes the student knew they were making a rule that favored them. Sometimes it's completely innocent, but when the players learn these rules exist, they get mad. They argue, “That's not fair. Then I'm changing my rule,” on and on.

When these unjust rules exist, I let the students vote. We gather all the rules on a white board and vote for our top four favorite rules. Of course, they still vote for rules that benefit them, they have the citizen ear listening, but they also realize that rules that are fair to others will also be fair to them, the noncitizen ear. Then we play our game with the new rules and everyone has a much better time.

This kind of synergy is what God wants for us and what Israel learns in our first reading today. Israel has been making their own laws and enforcing them for a while. As they interact with other nations, they realize everyone else has a king. They start to think a king would be so much easier. They wouldn't have to argue at committee meetings, decisions would be made so much quicker if one person had to make them all, and they would be able to send that one person off to meet with other nations instead of having to send a group of leaders. Israel thinks a king sounds awesome.

God however is not convinced. God has given them a good system – ordained a government that has brought them through hard times and kept them safe. God has enjoyed watching them work together, live together, and obey together. Sure, they have had disagreements. It's gotten sticky a couple of times, but in the long run they are doing so well. When they ask God for a king, God is offended. Why not work within the system in existence? God is okay with them making changes but God does not want them to give up their power to one person. God knows humans are flawed and how power can corrupt. Finding one good king is a feat but finding a line of people who will make

good decisions, fair, humble, wise decisions. God does not want Israel to open itself up to the disappointment and failure a king can cause.

The system God gives Israel, the one Paul advocated for, is one where the people work together, where people have the power. For Israel, Paul knows, and we also know, this kind of system has issues, but it's issues are no excuse to stop participating in it. It is God ordained. We are God ordained to make it work.

When Israel wanted out of the system God said, "NO." Paul is trying to get Christians to stop turning away from the system, because Paul knows together their power can make it better. They can use their immunity to torture and impose the death penalty, to speak truth loudly and hold the system accountable, something Paul does a lot in his lifetime. Paul is known to speak truth that Rome did not appreciate, but their own rules protected him from the consequences. Paul is able to use his status as a Roman citizen to say things and point things out that the noncitizens would be killed for saying. He uses his voice to amplify their experience.

Paul knows the power of the Christian vote within Rome. If every Christian used their vote to make the system a little more just, they could move the massively unjust Roman system one step towards looking like the kingdom of God.

The reason God wants power to stay with the largest group of people is because it is the best way for the Spirit to move. Presbyterian polity is set up around this belief.

In the Presbyterian tradition we believe the Spirit works best in groups. It's fine if one person feels called to something, but we like it better when groups of people are inspired to the same cause. It shows that the Spirit is clearly pointing the community in a direction, not just one outlier. My favorite example of how we let the Spirit move among groups for decision making is at the highest level of our Presbyterian governing, at our national general assembly. At GA, the national church discusses and votes on denominational issues. It is where we decided to allow the ordination of women and affirmed same sex marriage. Every presbytery sends commissioners to GA, representatives who vote on these motions.

Any commissioner who is sent to GA has the freedom to vote their conscience. This means if they left home thinking they would vote one way on something, they can change their mind at any point. No one is allowed to tell them they need to vote this way or that way. They are not delegates who cast a vote on behalf of others. They can vote however the Spirit leads them in that moment. The reasoning behind this is so as the debate on the floor is heard, they can have an open heart and open mind to what each voice is saying, and vote the way they believe God wants them to.

This may be the piece Christians forget the most. We need to let the Spirit enter our decision making. We need to pray about the choices we make. We need to remain open to the movement of God's Spirit even if it means changing completely from one vote to the next.

We have been ordained by God to choose the course of our government. This is what early Christians missed when they just criticized Rome and neglected to participate in the government. Paul is urging them to see that the system actually allows them to do God's work of uplifting the downtrodden. Christians listen with both ears, one as a citizen who receives the benefits of the system, and as a noncitizen. With our power we can demand all rules are transparent and not kept secret so we can assess if they are fair for everyone playing the game. Paul is begging us to be committed to participating in the system even though it is flawed. It would be easier to let someone else make the choices for us. But the Spirit needs all of us to do her work. So.... let's start now and pray today and every day that we make and keep making a system that is due all our honor and respect.