Romans 13 | POLITICS & THE CHURCH

Synopsis
General wisdom says when you go to family gatherings, there are only two topics that are off limits: religion and politics. This section combines the two. There aren’t many passages in Scripture that explicitly talk about the church’s relationship to the state or political affairs. Romans 13 is one of those places. Like any passage of Scripture, however, we have to look at it within its larger context.

This is obviously a section that could be conducive to chasing a rabbit down a trail. You might not stick to the script this week. As you see from this synopsis, there’s not much of a script! And that’s ok. We trust you, the leader, to have a good conversation that tries to get a handle on how Christians should approach the public square. The questions will be all over the place, but hopefully the commentary can help land us in a good spot. The key for the week is that Christians pledge their allegiance to Jesus first, then country. Not the other way around. There are options for how we can interact within our country, but we always look first to Christ. Not to the republicans (or the democrats).

The reading is Romans 13. The focus passage for the week is Romans 13:1-10.

The win this week: Discuss faith and politics without killing each other. Understand the allegiance is first to Christ, then to the state. (Don't align Christianity with a party. Jesus isn't partisan.) However we interact with the state should be dominated by this one ethic.

Church and State: Not so separate after all?

Read Romans 13:1-7

Commentary
Being a unique section focusing on politics, this will be a unique commentary section as well. We’ll take a look at the focus passage, but then think in a more general way about church and state and how those two interact.
Romans 13 seems to suggest that any ruler is ordained by God and we should blindly obey them no matter what. At least on the surface. However, if we look a little deeper, we’ll find there’s more going on. After all, it should be obvious that a guy like Hitler or Pol Pot isn’t a person “ordained by God.”

Bible scholar Philip H. Towner has a nice article on this topic, where he rightly points out that Romans 13:1-7, seen within the larger context, is really about transformation. As we see with the household codes in other parts of Scripture, the New Testament mostly affirms that Christian living takes place within a culture. Paul’s main goal is to spread the gospel, not the transformation of culture. Transformation of culture might be a natural byproduct, even if it’s not his primary focus. New Testament writers always show a sensitivity to the expectations of society at large, which allows the dialogue to continue. A Christianity completely divorced from culture is a Christianity with the inability to effectively evangelize.

Christianity, then, seeks for the reformation and transformation of structures, not unquestioned acceptance of them. This is most evident in the issue of slavery. Paul never explicitly condemns slavery, but is subversive when he calls slaves people. Christianity strongly affirmed the dignity of the human being. So while slavery was deeply ingrained in the culture at that time, it began to peel back as Christianity spread this message of human dignity. Paul instructs slaves to live in submission to their masters, but only so the masters will see the love of Jesus. Christianity does start a revolution, just not as we might expect, with guns and knives. It starts it’s revolution with love.

Similarly, Romans 13:1-7 affirms that Christians should, like slaves submitting to their masters, submit to the ruling authorities. But it is also subversive by calling Jesus, not Caesar, “Lord.” They serve God, not men. And their primary citizenship, according to Paul in Philippians 3:20, is in heaven, not the Roman Empire (or America).

Scholars have called v. 3 the central imperative. In it, Paul tells us that “those who do good” are not afraid of rulers. Romans 13:3-4 commands the ancient practice of “benefaction,” a social convention designed to ensure the welfare of the city through it’s richer citizens. This is a call for social responsibility, and to care for the least of these. In other words, the church can be an agent to transform society and to participate in public life. Romans 13:1-7 is not a command to obey any ruler at any cost.

Church and State FAQ
Now we’ll get a little more specific to America. Politics can be a hot button, controversial issue, as opinions differ wildly. So we’ll try to wade through these dangerous waters and have a fun conversation.

*What about the “separation of church and state”?*
First, the “separation of church and state” is not in the constitution. It actually comes from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson (who, for his part, was pretty anti-Christianity).
constitution, we are given the freedom of religion and told: “congress shall make no law prohibiting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In other words, no state-mandated religions. America can’t decide they want to be Mormon and force everyone to be Mormon. Rather, it allows for people to freely choose their religion.

An important concept needs to be discussed here though: we have freedom of religion, not freedom of worship. Freedom of worship implies something we do in private or on Sunday mornings. On the other hand, religion by definition is something that permeates every part of your life—including your moral intuitions and, yes, even your politics. In short, the constitution guarantees us the freedom to use our moral reasoning from our religion in politics. We can defend the sanctity of human life because it’s the right thing to do, even if we defend it because of the moral reasoning that “all people are made in the image of God.”

Christians, as we see in Romans 13:1-7, ought to be transformational in their approach to culture and the state. We don’t completely reject or ignore culture. We also don’t tacitly fall in line with everything we are told. Historical Christianity has helped prophetically stand against the state when it has erred (such as Nazi Germany or American slavery). Of course, the church isn’t perfect and we have our own share of mistakes. But the law of Christ stands above the law of the land.

This doesn’t mean we force people to be Christians. Christians understand the importance of religious liberty. But we also claim to know the source of life and truth. Shouldn’t we think he would be helpful in our politics as well?

**Should I be a republican or democrat?**
How about this for a campaign slogan: Jesus for President? Ok, maybe Jesus isn’t on the ballot. But our first allegiance is to Jesus, not the republicans or the democrats. This is the most important point for any Christian to understand about voting. Preacher Tim Keller said that if your politics don’t change when you start to follow Jesus, you might not actually be following Jesus. Being a Christian means we don’t neatly fit into this or that party platform. It’s pretty likely that our politics won’t line up perfectly with either party. There is a “but” though...

**How should I vote then?**
There are many important issues in every election. Environmental issues, income inequality, foreign policy, national defense, etc. Christians should be engaged with each of these issues and care deeply about every issue. Why? Because these issues affect people.

Yet throughout history, there are some cultural moments that are bigger than one election. There are times when a single issue transcends an election cycle. Think about the 1850’s. In the 1850’s, there was a major environmental issue. There were trees being torn down, on a major scale, to build railroads all across America. Certainly this was a difficult issue and an important issue of which there are a few different legitimate sides. But it’s an issue that paled
in comparison to the larger problem of slavery. So when you went to the ballot box in the 1850's or 1860's, you were voting about slavery. Because of their faith and their belief that all people were made in the image of God, Christians (like William Wilberforce in Great Britain) were enormously influential in eradicating slavery.

The issue of the day is abortion. And I get it. It’s uncomfortable and awkward to talk about. But this is the worse human rights violation in the history of the earth. And Christians ought to stand against it for the atrocity that it is. We believe that all human life is valuable and worthy because all people are made in God’s image. This issue is bigger than any election cycle. Of course there could be a bigger discussion to be had, but I will always vote for the most pro-life candidate until abortion is done. This is the best guideline for voting I could give any Christian wondering how to vote.

(Note: There is a level of anti-abortionism here that can be unhelpful. Yes we stand against abortion, but not against the people. Even if they are abortionists or a mother who has had or is thinking about an abortion. The response is always love. We think there is a way we can be pro-woman and pro-baby. This is something important to include if the abortion discussion comes up in your group. You might have someone in your group that has had an abortion, or knows someone who has.)

❓ Questions

What does Paul mean by “rebelling against the authorities?”

Paul talks about giving “respect and honor” to the government. What does this look like? How can we do that without making the government our ultimate?

Does Paul mean that God has instituted all authorities? How could this be?

❓ Application Questions

I’ve heard one famous Christian teacher say he was arrested for not paying taxes one time because his taxes were going to “unethical things.” I’ve heard another Christian teacher say he one time gave extra money for his taxes because he wanted to “bless his government.” Are either right? How should Christians handle taxation?

Is it a sin to drive over the speed limit? Why or why not?

Do you think it is ever ok for a Christian to kill another person? When? Why or why not?

What do you think Jesus would say about war? Is it always wrong? Never wrong?
Do you think a Christian could be President or a high office in government?

Terrorism is a major issue in the world. What is the Christian response to terrorism?

In what situation, if ever, is it appropriate to say “I think it’s ok for me because I’m a Christian, but I don’t want to impose my beliefs on anyone else?”

Should Christians be political at all? Should we avoid it, or engage?

How involved should Christians be in politics? Do we always have to be experts?

Are there ever political issues too controversial for Christians to get involved with?

How can Christians actually be involved with a political issue or campaign?

How does a Christian frame policy decision differently than non-Christians? What questions do Christians have to ask that non-Christians don’t?

What are the driving ideologies and motivations behind different political parties? How does a Christian interact with these ideologies and motivations?

Is abortion wrong in every circumstance? Why?

**Accountability**

We know that Paul kept ultimate things ultimate. Christ is always first, even above politics. Paul’s point here is not that the state is ultimate. In fact, it’s because of Jesus’ superiority that we submit to the governing authorities. This is a passage about submission.

Submission can be difficult, though. It’s easy to have a heart of rebellion in any number of ways. Maybe we aren’t a murderer, but we can still disrespect and dishonor the authorities in our lives. And authority doesn’t just have to mean the state. Sometimes it’s your teacher or boss or even your parents.

- How can you humbly serve and submit to the “ruling authorities” in your life?
- How do you submit to the ruling authorities, even when you know them to be in the wrong?

**Resource Toolbox**

- Greg Boyd on the Kingdom of God in Romans 13
- Tim Keller - Arguing about Politics
- Craig Keener on Church and State