

Road Trip Devotion - Romans 13:1-5

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“Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. The authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God’s servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.” (Romans 13:1-5; NLT)

Paul’s words here seem strange to many Christians. When we think of the government today, our thoughts are often filled with cynicism. Government is not to be trusted. There may be a few good people, but taken as a whole, we often do not believe that governments have our best interests at heart. Too often politicians seem to be more interested in their own welfare than that of the people they are supposed to represent. It does not matter (for our purposes here) whether this cynicism is justified or not - the simple reality is that most of us have become cynical about government, and that cynicism makes Paul’s words very strange to our ears.

When situated in its context in Romans, however, Paul’s words start to make a bit more sense. Paul has just finished telling his readers not to take vengeance into their own hands (see Rom 12:19-21). And so in this passage he goes on to tell them about the system God has set up to provide order in the midst of chaos: human government. Paul’s message here is not that all specific examples human government are right and good and ordained by God - he himself likely wrote these words under Nero, a corrupt Roman emperor who would eventually persecute Christians in terrible ways. Instead, he is saying that God has provided government in general for the establishment of order - to punish those who do evil, and protect those who do good. He is telling his readers that they do not need to take vengeance into their own hands because God has already set up a system that - when it is working correctly - is designed to keep order and protect those who live blameless lives.

We understand this even in the midst of our cynicism, don’t we? Despite our mistrust of governmental authorities, we still look to government to see thieves and murderers brought to justice. We still look to government to protect the weak from those who would exploit them. Despite our cynicism, we still believe that government has a role in maintaining order and protecting its citizens from harm. And this is good, because it is the reason God designed government in the first place - to be a force for good in the world, ensuring that people are protected from those who would do them harm.

So I encourage you not to give in to cynicism, despite the very real problems with all human forms of government. All human systems are broken and tainted by sin. But God has set governmental rulers in authority for a reason - because they are necessary in a fallen world, despite being a part of it as well. Pray for our leaders. Encourage them to be better. Choose leaders who will protect the innocent and vulnerable. Help where you can. And remember that God wants us to be good citizens wherever we find ourselves, even as we must remember that our first allegiance will always be to his Kingdom, rather than any earthly kingdom.