

First Presbyterian Church
Romans 12:1-2; 13:1-7, “The Faithful Citizen”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/5/2026

So, did you mark the 250th Year of these United States of America well?
I hope you did. Regardless of how you assess our present moment,
250 years of a country’s existence is truly a moment
worth reflecting upon and celebrating.

This country aspires to preserve personal liberties,
offer equal protection under the law, establish a representative government
with checks and balances, cultivate a spirit of innovation,
make one people out of many (*e pluribus unum*)
and has demonstrated the capacity to pursue equality
for women, racial minorities, LGBTQ community, people with disabilities
and others who have suffered over the years.

This work is not finished, but we’re better off than we were 50 years ago.
And how about the World Cup? It’s pretty fun, right?
There’s much to celebrate,
and of course there’s much to critique, lament, worry over,
and repent of.

These realities can be held in tension without denying either one.

The NY Times editorial board put it exceptionally well yesterday:

Americans can be tempted to treat the country’s founding as either a flawless act of genius or an irredeemable original sin. It was neither. It was a revolutionary moral claim issued by imperfect people who did not fully live up to it. “All men are created equal” was written by a man who enslaved his fellow human beings; the promise and the betrayal arrived in the same sentence. Yet the promise, once written, could not be undone.

Today I want us to consider a challenging question:

What does it mean to be a faithful citizen
within a global super power?

Allow me to elaborate a bit on that question:

Jesus is the Crucified One who *died* on a Roman cross
and calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

Jesus declared that all authority on heaven and earth have been given to him.
How do we follow Jesus while also participating as citizens
of a global super power which operates quite apart
from the ways of Jesus?

To answer that question, many people throughout history have turned
to Romans 13 for an answer ... however, I'm not sure that this passage
truly supports what some interpreters have read into it over the years.

The Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans to a community of Jesus followers
in the heart of the Roman Empire – the greatest global power of its time.
And Chapter 13 speaks directly to the dynamic of a Christian's duty
with regard to national governments.

Unfortunately, this passage has become legendary for its misinterpretations
and damaging impact throughout history.

For instance, 250 years ago during the American Revolution,
the British cited Romans 13 while decrying the rebellion of the 13 colonies.
God had established the British government's authority
and by resisting it, the Americans were resisting God.

In 1933, Rev. Otto Dibelius cited Romans 13
in a sermon urging German Christians to support Hitler.
He counselled that even when the state acts harshly,
Christians must support it.

White slave owners in the United States also used Romans 13
to justify their authority over the Black enslaved men,
women, and children who greatly enriched slaveowners
and suffered unspeakable abuse.

South African scholar Winsome Munro describes Romans 13:1-7
as apartheid's last biblical refuge.

“Having abandoned its previous biblical bases for support of apartheid
ideology, the white Dutch Reformed church, in common with the
state, pointed to this passage and its parallels as the ultimate sanction
for enforced submission.”

And in 2018, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions brought out Rom 13
to defend the first Trump Administration's zero tolerance immigration policy
which led to over 4,600 children being separated
from their families while seeking asylum –
1,350 were never reunited.

Needless to say, if you ever feel the urge to bring up Romans 13
to commend support your government's actions,
you should probably consider the company you're keeping.

The rest of Scripture is clear that faithful people have no obligation
to support the atrocities and corruption in governments
or other power structures.

Even the Apostle Paul, who wrote the passage in question,
resisted the injustices of Rome and was imprisoned for it.

So if giving the government carte-blanc support isn't what Rom. 13 instructs,
what *does* it point us to?

And in the bigger picture, as our country celebrates its 250th year,
what does it mean to be a faithful citizen?

That is to say, a citizen of the United States
who live by faith in Jesus the Crucified One?

Rom. 12:1-2 sets out a vision of Christian life that is starkly contrasted to
a cozy relationship with worldly powers.

“Do not be conformed to the powers of the world –
rather be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Fitting into the mold of the world around
sabotages the work that God is doing in us through the Holy Spirit.

The aim of God is our transformation into the liberating likeness Christ
rather than being stuck in the debilitating patterns of world.
This is Paul emphasizing the opposite of unfailing obedience
to gov't authority: *Do not be conformed, but rather
overcome evil with good.*

If you put yourself in the sandals of an ancient Roman Christian,
you might imagine this teaching to form a basis to
resist or undermine an unjust government.
It's not difficult to imagine them wondering,
If God is transforming our minds so we do not conform to the world,
are we still subject to civil laws and authorities?
Should we still pay taxes to Rome?

Paul's answer to these implied questions comes in chapter 13:

Christians should submit to the authority which exists in their time and place.
Submit means to accept and acknowledge the legitimacy of
governments to govern.

Why? Because God desires ordered social relationships rather than chaos,
and it is God who institutes governmental authorities.

Does this mean God agrees with, endorses, or approves of what governments do?
BY NO MEANS!

All that Paul is saying is that within God's sovereign order,
governments exist to restrain evil activity
and preserve things that serve the public good.
That's what they can do.

Paul is suggesting that governments partner with God's purpose
(in the broadest sense) when they function in this way,
and so if Christians reject government authority,
they shouldn't be surprised when they are punished.

Have you heard of the "sovereign citizen" movement?

From Wikipedia: *Adherents to the Sovereign Citizen movement
believe that courts or law enforcements authorities
have no jurisdiction over people and that certain procedures
and loopholes can make one immune to
government laws and regulations.*

*They regard most forms of taxation as illegitimate and reject state documentation
such as Social Security numbers, driver's licenses, and vehicle registration.*

Paul is essentially saying, in his first century manner,
“Don’t be a fool by thinking you can find loopholes around paying taxes
and being subject to the laws of your own country.
God has given them authority to punish wrongdoing and
preserve the public good.”

Or as Jesus put it,
“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, but unto God what is God’s.”

With this in mind, how could someone possibly come to the conclusion that
Paul is instructing Christians who are citizens of Rome
to unquestioningly support the violent and coercive actions of Rome?

It’s preposterous. When governments fail to punish wrongdoing
and fail to protect those who live in their bounds,
they will be held to account by God.

And if a Christian is asked by their country to act in a way
that contradicts the way of Jesus Christ,
they must bow to the One by whose authority
their country exists at all.

If you are tracking with me up to this point,
I need to alert you all to a trap that is easily fallen into.
It’s called “Two Kingdoms Theology.”

SLIDE

This theology suggests that there’s the personal sphere of life
that God has entrusted the church to deal with
(evangelism, spiritual growth, worship, caring for our neighbors, etc),
and then there’s the societal sphere of life
that God has entrusted nation states to deal with
(laws, taxes, justice, wars, etc.).

SLIDE

The problem with this theology is that it assumes the life of Christ
and redeeming work of the Holy Spirit only pertain to the left column,
not the right column.

The teachings of Jesus are just to get us into heaven,
not to change the fundamental ways that human beings relate to each other,
creation, and God.

Christian Nationalists agree! But their solution is for Christians
to take over the government.

(This can be true for both conservatives and progressives.)

But is the gospel of Jesus that God will save the world
through Christians taking over the government?

We know from history that this combination leads to
some of the most horrific abuses imaginable.

And that is the perspective driving many people at the very highest
levels of the United States government today.

SLIDE

Instead, we need an integrated theology.

God's Spirit will make a new heavens and earth through the resurrection of Christ
the King.

- Not established by political power over others (Christian Nationalism)
- Not abandoning public sphere to the world (Two Kingdom Theology)
- Transformation (at all levels) happens through the life of Christ expressed in self-giving love by the Spirit-filled people of God who stand with the suffering and call the powers to account

Well run governments can preserve things for the public good
and restrain evil activity,
but they cannot transform the heart of a society to be good.

So we should never expect our country to do what only God can do.
You can make laws to punish racist hiring practices,
but you cannot make laws that stop people from being racist.

There's nothing wrong with being proud of your country
(whether the United States or any other country),
as long as you aren't taken in by its mythology and propaganda.

There's nothing wrong with protesting your country's evils,
as long as you don't think you and your kind are the ones
who should put on the ring of power and set the world right.

If we look to our country to give life meaning and purpose,
to establish flourishing relationship between humanity and creation,
or resolve conflicts in ways that bring lasting peace,
then we have misplaced our faith
and declared that Jesus' power is greatly limited.

In closing, with all of this in mind, listen again to Rom. 12:1-2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.