

“THE POWERS THAT BE”

Thomas Robinson, July 2, 2017

ROMANS 13: 1-8

¹ Let every life (*psyche*) be subject to higher authorities. For there is not any authority except by God, and forms of authority that exist have been arranged by God. ² As a result the one who opposes authority has resisted the ordinance of God, and those who have resisted will receive a judgment on themselves.

³ For those who rule are not a fear to the good deed, but to the bad. Do you wish not to fear authority? Do what is good, and you will receive its praise. ⁴ For it is God's minister to you toward what is good. But if you do what is bad, be afraid, for authority does not bear the sword in vain. For it is an avenging servant of God, for wrath/punishment on the one practicing what is bad. ⁵ From this flows the necessity to be in subjection, not only because of the wrath / punishment but also because of the conscience. ⁶ For because of this also you pay tributes, for they are God's service workers, implementing this very thing.

⁷ Pay to all what is owed: to whom tribute is owed, tribute; to whom tax, tax; to whom fear, fear; to whom honor, honor. ⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves the other has fulfilled law.

REVELATION 18: 1-13 JOHN'S VISION OF GOD'S JUDGMENT ON ROME

¹ After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. ² And he called out with a mighty voice,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons...”

³ *For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.”*

⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, *“Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, ... ⁵ for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. ⁶ Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, ⁷ As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning.... ⁸ And she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”*

⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. ¹⁰ They will ... say, *“Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.”*

¹¹ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, ¹² cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, ..., bronze, iron and marble, ¹³ ..., wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.

MARK 10: 42-45

So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the nations those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are dominate over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be everyone's slave (*doulos*). ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (*diakonein*), and to give his life a ransom for many.”

1 PETER 2: 9, 11-17

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ...

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles ¹² conduct yourselves honorably among the nations, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God

¹³ Because of the Lord, accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or of governors, as sent by him to punish wrongdoers and to praise those who do right.

¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶ As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Patriotism, Authority, Rebellion

It's 4th of July weekend. Memorial of the beginning of rebellion, 241 yrs ago, 1776. The colonies rejected "the Powers that be" (Rm 13:1 KJV) and began a war for independence. US history is long & complicated, with great advances and profound problems that we still wrestle with. It's one of many nations, empires, colonies, people groups across history. Christians live within all nations, under all authorities, in tension with all. We all experience patriotism, connection to the land of our birth or ancestors or ethnic group or home. A modern nation like US is not like ancient Israel: tribal/royal, under covenant with God. Nor exactly like the Roman empire. But it's more like Greco-Roman pluralism than like Israel. Our texts all try to make sense of life under Rome in language from the scripture of Israel. Paul, Peter strive to find a way to live at the bottom of empire that can be hostile power. Today's church lives in a pluralist society open to faith (as private opinion) and non-faith. Strong civil religion, materialism, individualism, and freedom. Religion is a marketplace.

Church and Power

Church leaders, like others, have long felt the lure of power, control (to do good, of course). Rom 13:1-7, influential in history. King James saw it as the divine right of kings. It was written by Paul whose back was bloodied by Roman rods and Synagogue whips. Why write this: to help believers live by their values within a society with hostile destructive power. It's abstract, affirming authority, not Nero as emperor. Under God's universal sovereignty. Paul often went against authority and received its wrath. But he knew that the rulers were not absolute, had a task to support right and punish wrong, for which they'd be judged. Peter uses scripture images for believers as a "holy nation" living in exile scattered among the nations. They submit to emperors in order to live exemplary lives. They're free, but honor everyone, even the emperor, in order to live the life of love to which they are called. As Rome persecuted the church, the evils of the empire became more central. John saw a vision of God's judgment against Rome/Babylon. Against its web of power that involved other nations, against its economic web of trade that treated humans like commodities. It is a call to believers not to commit themselves to a particular power, which will fall. None of these could imagine a truly Christian government. Nor has there ever been one. In spite of such warnings, the leaders of the church, structured their power as a hierarchy like Rome. With Constantine, Rome did not become Christian, but the church was coopted by the empire. Jesus' command about greatness was swamped by the lures of power.

Living within the Empire

Jesus contrasts the power of human rulers to a different kind of greatness rooted in service and self-giving love. Our faith is a testimony to the truth that at its deepest level the universe is not based on the power of law, imposed will, and violence but on the power of love that is the heart and character of God. Any government leaders are capable of corruption, sin, injustice, like any of us. More so under of the corrupting effects of power. In our society we as citizens are part of "the Powers that be" and must take responsibility. As Christians (aliens and exiles) our aim is not a theocratic state. No coercion, ever! But God is profoundly concerned about justice in society, about how the poor and vulnerable are treated, overcoming oppression and treating all people as God's creatures with honor. Christians have the right and responsibility to engage. Enter the fray with others for political and social improvements in society. Our society is important, but so also the larger story.