

Romans 13:1-7 “Defund the Police?”
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The city of Atlanta is still reeling in the aftermath of the police shooting of Mr. Rayshard Brooks. This week the Fulton County District Attorney charged both officers and issued warrants for their arrest. The action has demoralized Atlanta’s police force some of which has been stricken with a case of the “Blue Flu.” Officers calling in sick. Not coming in to work. The case has created quite a bit of controversy which I’ll leave for the courts.

We must understand how the police shooting of Mr. Rayshard Brooks has affected African-Americans. It has affected those in our ChristChurch family. Our own Director of Facilities, Dr. Carl Jones, expressed this at our staff meeting Tuesday. By the way, as senior pastor, I took the liberty to bestow upon Carl an honorary doctorate, a PhD in Facility Management. I require the staff to refer to him as “Dr. Carl.” I cannot require that of you. You don’t work for me. But I would urge you to do so. Give honor to whom honor is due. Dr. Carl deserves our highest respect for his 35 years of experience in facility management. Dr. Carl learned of the shooting from Mr. Shaun Smith, who works as his assistant. Shaun phoned Dr. Carl, “Police shot a black man.” What I learned from Carl is that such news is distressing, instinctively. It instinctively evokes memories of the history of police brutality against black people. Who can forget the horrible images during the Civil Rights movement of peaceful protesters in Selma, Birmingham, beaten by police, attacked by K9’s? Terrible. Horrific. What upset Carl in this recent instance, was that his nephew Brian lives a block from the Wendy’s where the shooting occurred. I know Brian. He has worshipped with us. Shaun called Dr. Carl to just to tell him, “There’s been a shooting, it wasn’t Brian.” Still Dr. Carl was not comforted until he heard the man’s name and knew for certain that it wasn’t Brian.

The recent shooting of Mr. Rayshard Brooks is upsetting for black people. White people must empathize and appreciate the experience of our black friends regarding the police. Historically it has been a bad experience. “Black Lives Matter.” “Black Lives Matter” is a matter of fact. True. Right. Just. Which I have defended in my ministry. I have been attacked as a “N-word lover.” My critic meant it as an insult. I took that as a compliment. Black Lives Matter. With that said, creating controversy around the fact that “Black Lives Matter” is an organization by that name which calls for the defunding of the police. You can go to their website and see. It describes the organization as an “ideological and political intervention.” One which political intervention is to “Defund the Police.”

This raises a great question which has become part of the national conversation. Defund the police? A question that we must consider in the context of anti-police sentiment, especially in light of what took place last week in Atlanta. Should the police be defunded? What does the Bible say? Does the Bible even mention police? Yes, implicitly in this passage. When we examine the text we learn that *because God has instituted the police force, then you and I should fund the police and work together to produce professional police.*

Government Is Instituted by God

This letter is written by the Apostle Paul. He is in Corinth on his second missionary journey. He writes this letter to the church in Rome. He didn’t plant the church. He has never

visited the church. But he plans to on his way to Spain. So he writes this letter to network with the members. Magna Carter of the gospel. In Chapter 13, Paul addresses their citizenship. They live in Rome. How, as Christians, are they to live in the Roman Empire, under the rule of Caesar?

Verse 1, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.* Paul calls these early believers to subject themselves to the governing authorities. To obey the authorities. Immediately, this becomes challenging for us. People do not like authority. Even authority within the church, the session, the pastors. Just as there is authority within the Church so too there is the authority of the state to which we must yield. As Jesus teaches, *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.* Governing authorities in the Church and the State. Whoever that may be in State. Caesar in the case of the first century Roman Empire. Or prince, parliament, president, and by extension, the police force. How do you know? Verse 4, *For he does not bear the sword in vain.* The state bears the sword. What does that mean? The sword is a symbol of force. Two types; military force, police force. The state is given the authority to defend its citizens from two types of evildoers; foreign and domestic. Enemies outside the border of the state who attack its citizens, 911. Evildoers within the state itself; rioters, looters, murderers, kidnappers, thieves. For which the State bears the sword: The police force.

Back to verse 1, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.* Notice Paul's argument. How he begins. He doesn't begin in verse 1 by saying, "Obey the police because you'll stay out of trouble. Obey the police because law and order are necessary to restrain anarchy in society." Excellent pragmatic reasons which Paul he gets to in vv. 3-4. But that is not where Paul begins his argument. He doesn't start with the pragmatic, he starts with the theological, specifically the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. *For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.* In the U.S., we speak of the government deriving its power from the consent of the governed. Yet the apostle argues that the government derives its authority from God. Instituted by God. God is absolutely free and sovereign. He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. *Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will.* If God controls the smallest, most insignificant event as the fall of the sparrow, then certainly, neither president nor police force can rise to power that He has not ordained. Why obey the police? Because God instituted the police, that's why. No police force exists that He has not instituted.

We need to seriously grapple with the sovereignty of God in this. Because we are quite willing to obey Christian authorities. Authorities that we like, those that are respectable and professional. Good guys. But what about the bad guys? Who is emperor when Paul writes? Nero. The emperor who begins state-sponsored persecutions against Christians. Who burns believers in his garden at night. Nero is the emperor under whom Paul is executed, beheaded. Yet Paul insists that these early believers are to subject themselves to him. This is most exemplified in Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. Pilate figures out quickly that the Jews are framing this Nazarene. Pilate knows that He is innocent. So Pilate tries to help Jesus. But Jesus remains silent. *So Pilate said to Him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above (Jn. 19:10).* Pilate's possesses real authority. Because it is given to him by God. As one invested with authority, Pilate has the right to decide as he sees fit in Jesus' trial. He has the authority to make a decision about Jesus

even if it is wrong. Even if he wrongly puts to death the Son of God, he possesses that authority. Of course, I'm glad that he got it wrong. Because by Jesus' death I am made right with the Father. Reconciled, justified, adopted. Yet Jesus acknowledges Pilate's authority and yields to it. We are called to obey the bad guys just as much as the good guys. Because even an unjust emperor, like Nero; or an unjust governor like Pilate, is better than total anarchy, chaos in the streets of the city. That is what you get without him. We are back to the book of Judges. *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* (Judg. 21:25). No king, no government, no state to rule the population. So everyone did what he thought right. Invade cities, vandalize, loot, pillage, plunder, riot, murder, rape, butcher. *everyone did what is right in his own eyes.* That is not where we want to go. Total anarchy. Not safe to come to church. An orderly society is good for the Church. Good for the gospel, its proclamation. So even an unjust governor like Pilate is better than anarchy and chaos. How does Jesus react to Pilate? Jesus shows no disrespect to Pilate. He acknowledges Pilate's authority. *it had been given you from above.* What Paul says here. *For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.* So Jesus respects that authority. He does not warn Pilate that if Pilate fails to do justice then His followers will rise in rebellion and loot Jerusalem and burn down the city. Instead of being rioters and anarchists, Christians are required to be the very best citizens and pay taxes and vote in elections and obey the authorities. Indeed pray for them. Seek the welfare of the city. Countercultural.

The Police Force Is Appointed For Good

Why obey the police? The theological reason. *Verse 2, Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.* To resist the police is to resist what God has appointed. To rebel against the law of the land is to rebel against God. For that God will punish us. How? *...those who resist will incur judgment.* A good pragmatic reason. Rob a bank, police arrest you and go to jail. On the other hand, do right, you stay out of trouble. *Verse 3, For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval.* Do good you stay out of trouble. The very reason for which the state is instituted. For good. *Verse 4, for he is God's servant for your good.* The Greek word for servant is *diakonos* from which we get the English word *deacon*. The civil magistrate is God's deacon, servant. The servant does the master's will. The state executes God's will. *For your good.* The government exists for the good of the people. Vital. Contrary to the belief of many American politicians who don't understand the biblical function of government. They think that the people exists for good of the government. Backwards. The people don't exist for the good of the government. The government exists for the good of the people. *for he is God's servant for your good.* The government doesn't exist to be a parasite upon the people but as a protection for them.

How? By bearing the sword. *Verse 4, ...But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.* The sword is a symbol of force; military force, police force. The sword is also a literal instrument? A weapon which executes, ushers death. Here is a reference to the death penalty, capital punishment. There was a time in this country when someone could be put to death for horse stealing. That is not what's in view here. For in Paul's theology, capital punishment is the penalty for murder only. How so? Because murder was the reason for which death penalty was instituted. After the flood. Gen. 9. God reissued the Cultural Mandate *to be fruitful and multiply fill the earth and subdue it.* But on the do-over, He adds an edict. *Whoever*

sheds man's blood by man his blood shall be shed for in the image of God He made man (Gen. 9:6). For the New World Order, God gives instructions to restrain the violence and anarchy that led to the Flood. The command is: blood for blood. Life for life. The death penalty, capital punishment. To whom is the authority given for executing the guilty? *Verse 6, ... by man shall his blood be shed.* By man. Mankind, the human race. Initially seen in Noah's family. Then as they repopulate the earth, the authority transfers to particular tribes, then in turn to the different nations around the world. In Rome, Caesar through his governors. Pre-flood God deals with the anarchy and violence directly via global judgment. Post-flood He limits it indirectly by instituting government in order to execute the death penalty.

But what about "Thou shall not kill," "Turn the other cheek." We are confusing categories. There are two categories. The category of the citizen, that of the state. Christ calls the citizen, the individual to turn the other cheek. He institutes the government to bear the sword. The government is not called to turn the other cheek. The government is not called to play the part of the Good Samaritan. Christ calls the citizen, the individual to be a good Samaritan. Not the government. God calls the citizen to *love thy neighbor*. Not the State. The state's role is to bear the sword against its neighbor, neighboring nations which attack its citizens. The State's role is to bear the sword.

The Reason: God's Concern for Vengeance

The real reason? *Verse 4, But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.* The state's role is that of an avenger. Here is the heart of the matter. Vengeance. When I am wronged, like when my car was parked in the lot then hit by a driver who runs. I'm outraged. I am ready to kill someone. That's my nature. But God forbids the citizen to take vengeance. *Never avenge yourself, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord"* (Rom. 12:19). God forbids us to take vengeance, not because vengeance is morally wrong, unjust. No vengeance is just. God forbids us to take it because we don't have the authority to do so. It is an issue of authority. Whose authority? God's. The Fulton County Courthouse does not possess the authority to settle matters before the Supreme Court. It doesn't have the jurisdiction. Its not in the same league as the Supreme Court. Likewise, we don't have authority to take vengeance. It is out of our league. It belongs to the Big League, God's. For vengeance is a matter of justice. So it belongs to God because He is absolutely just. Justice is an attribute of His. God is not simply concerned for justice. God is just. Justice is identical to His Being. Flows from His nature. God must execute vengeance because He Is Who He Is. On earth, God executes vengeance through His servant, the state, which He has empowered with the authority to take vengeance. By personally refusing revenge, by leaving vengeance in Caesar's hands, we are leaving it in God's hands. For the state is God's servant.

In the prohibition against vengeance, we have "the very essence of piety" (Murray, 141). To take vengeance in our own hands is to put ourselves on God's level. Vengeance is an act of unbelief. "I will do what is right in my own eyes. I am God and there is no other." So in the prohibition against vengeance, there is the very essence of piety. The essence of piety is to recognize that there is a God and you are not Him. Therefore we are to subject ourselves to God by subjecting ourselves to His servant, the state, the police.

The Case for Civil Disobedience

Does that mean that one must obey the police in each and every circumstance? No, there are times which call for civil disobedience. Lawful disobedience. People in power go on a power trip. Power goes to their head. The authorities command the unlawful. Just because a policeman with a gun in his hand orders us to do something does not necessarily mean that we should. There are times when Christians are called to refuse obedience. Basically, whenever the law of the state violates the higher law of God. One example, suppose the State outlaws Christianity. No more preaching. See this in the book of Acts. Peter and John create quite a fuss when preaching in the temple. The temple police arrest them and bring them before the Sanhedrin. The Supreme Court/Senate of Israel which orders them to cease preaching in Jesus' name. The authorities put a gag-order on them, censure free speech. How do they respond? *Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard* (Acts 4:19-20). So they keep preaching and the police arrest them again. They go to trial, the Sanhedrin threatens, *We strictly charged you not to teach in this name*. The apostles defend their disobedience, *We must obey God rather than men* (Acts 4:29).

Another example, no more worshipping. The state bans public worship. Which could have become an issue in the COVID-19 crisis. Governor Kemp issued a stay at home order, no public worship in order to flatten the curve. That is all he asked. The Session—out of love for our neighbor and the welfare of the city—willingly complied because we knew that it was temporary. Thankfully, Governor Kemp quickly released the restrictions. But what had he not done so? Like governors in other states had planned and began rhetoric about not lifting restrictions on churches. “COVID-19 is deadly. Churches are closed until a cure is found. Churches are closed until the disease is eradicated.” That is a game-changer. That could be years or never. A case which warrants civil disobedience. *We must obey God rather than men*.

Second example. When the state commands immoral acts upon the part of Christians, the unethical. Then must disobey. Like in Nazi Germany. The German people were outlawed from any contact with Jews. Can't do business with them. No friendships. Can't greet them on the street. Corrie ten Boon hid Jews. Civil disobedience. She was right to do so.

Third example, tyranny. God institutes government for the good of the people. But when the authorities abandon that roll and harms the people, as a tyrant, excessive taxation, exploitation, then there is warrant for civil disobedience. As in case of the American Revolution, the conspiracy against Hitler, the peaceful protests of the Civil Rights movement, lawful disobedience. With that said, in this last example of civil disobedience one must be careful. For it is easy to cross the line. In seeking to disobey unjust laws one can break just laws. Like the shooting of an abortion doctor in Pensacola. Simply because one believes that abortion is murder does not warrant the murder of the doctor. But beyond these extremes, we are to obey the police *for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer*.

Defund the Police?

Verse 6, *For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing*. We pay taxes in order to fund the state which funds the police force. Does God want to defund the police? No. Fund them. For in these last weeks of protest and riots, 700 police have been injured. Bricks, rocks thrown at them. Molotov cocktails. 700 serious

injuries. White and black. At least one paralyzed, a few killed. A chief of police of one major city, threw his force under the bus and apologized to the protestors. Here in Atlanta, a case of the “Blu Flu.” There is not much incentive at the moment to remain on the police force, nonetheless join the force. Thankfully some in Atlanta have recognized this. A police foundation, through donations, gave the force \$2 million this week. Which results in each officer receiving a \$500 bonus. The reason was to “stem attrition and boost morale.” That’s great. But a one-time bonus in an officer’s career might not be enough. They deserve another \$500 a week to be shot at. The force should be funded enough to make it lucrative for a person to forego a better paying job. Fund them in order to recruit better candidates. Fund them to provide better training. Fund them for the welfare of the city, Atlanta United. If the police are defunded then who is hurt? Besides the black families in unpoliced neighborhoods. The great black men and women on the force. In my sojourn in Atlanta, I have mostly encountered black police. One pulled me over recently because my tag was about to expire. He wanted to forewarn me as a courtesy. Uber polite, uber professional. We hit it off. I introduced myself as the pastor of ChristChurch Presbyterian, gave him my card, and invited him to worship with us. I haven’t seen him yet but perhaps he’ll come one day. If we defund the police, he loses his job. Interim police Chief Bryant loses his job. Black men and women on the force lose their jobs.

Is that all we owe the finest of Atlanta, funding? *Verse 7, Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.* In addition to funding, we owe the police respect and honor. For when we respect and honor the police then we respect and honor God. Amen.