

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript.

Teaching: Carlon Tschetter
Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: What Good is Government?

Transcribed Message
April 30, 2023
Romans 13:3-4

We're going to begin this morning with a five question quiz. We've got five questions and there are six blanks in these questions. They're going to appear on the screen in just a moment and as always do your own work. But in this case, I'm giving you the advantage of the answers in advance. You just have to fill in the appropriate one. There are two possible answers to each of these questions. The answer could be America or the answer could be Jesus. Here we go. It is going to help us to understand a little bit more of Romans 13 and the relationship between the church and government. Are you ready? Pencils and pens in hand.

Question number one. Jesus or America is the world's best hope. Question number two. Jesus or America is the savior of the world. Number three. The only way for us to live up to the promise of Jesus or America is to give Jesus or America our all and to give it for all of us. Question number four. We must keep Jesus or America first in our hearts. Number five. Jesus or America is the light and glory among the nations. The answer to all of the questions is actually the same. The answer according to those who made these statements is in every case America. These statements have been made by former presidents and by former candidates running for president of the United States. When you look at those answers in that regard I would think most of us would probably say that's putting a little bit too much emphasis and attention on our country and on America and not nearly enough on Jesus and what it is that He alone can do. I would think we would probably all be in agreement, or nearly all of us I hope, that in fact that's a little bit too high of a view of government as we read through the eyes of Paul and the Holy Spirit in Romans 13.

Let's come back to this 13th chapter of Romans and see what we can accomplish this morning as we look at verses 3 and 4. We want to see this morning that every

government is established by God to carry out His purposes. That's what God has designed that government would accomplish and carry out His purposes.

A very quick review of the opening verses that we've already looked at. Four things to remind us of. The first one is our submission to government doesn't require a good government. There isn't anything that we've read to this point in these opening verses that says the only time we obey government, the only time we submit is when government is good. In fact, we have said repeatedly that history and biblical history establishes the fact that God's people have lived under every form of government and even under no government. We know that the call of God on our life as we submit to His word is to realize that no matter where God has us, and He's obviously speaking to His people through the centuries in all of these different contexts and all of these different places universally all around the world.

Secondly, our submission to government applies in every context. That simply flows out of the first. It applies to every context. We don't submit just according to the worthiness of the government we find ourselves under. We're called on to submit in all of those cases, in all the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Number three. The storyline of the Bible as we noted last week suggested civil disobedience is rare. There are times and we noted those last week. There are a few more than what we looked at, but the ones that we looked at are the main ones that reflect in general the principles that God has set forward with regard to civil disobedience. What we saw was yes, we submit to government, but there may very well come a point in time in some circumstance, in some situation where we have to say with Peter or Paul, we must obey God rather than man. We know that happens. I think the storyline of the Bible suggests that it's rare that most of the time we see God's people submitting even in difficult circumstances.

Then lastly and we have said this repeatedly and will continue to remind ourselves that Romans 12 would indicate to us that our disposition is more important than government decisions. We are to be looking at the totality of God's revelation. Again, we're putting ourselves underneath in submission to God's word and what it reminds us is that we're exiles. We're exiles in this world. We're just passing through. This is not our home. We shouldn't put our roots down so deeply that we forget that our

citizenship is first and foremost as being citizens of heaven. The mandate on our life as the church and as believers is that we would be salt and light.

What did Paul say in Philippians? That we'd be salt and light in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. That's our life right now. That's the world that we live in. That's the fallenness and the brokenness of our world. God knew full well the world that He was calling His people to live in as exiles, as those who are citizens of heaven on their way journeying through a world that is lost and in desperate need of the gospel. Paul says to us in that 12th chapter: maintain a spirit of humility. He says to us to adopt the position of self-denial. He says as you walk through those experiences trust Me and not yourself.

It seems to me what Paul is doing in Romans 12 as the lead-in to Romans 13 is very likely to suggest to us that the greater danger to our spiritual lives as Christ followers is not the government but it is our own fallen tendencies. Pride. Demanding of rights. Thinking I've got this. I don't need God for this. I think that's how this 13th chapter is set up. It's set up to remind us that there is a greater threat. There is a greater danger to our walk with God than Washington DC or any other place of authority. It's this internal battle that we all deal with every day.

Let's look this morning at the proper role of government. It seems to me that in verses 3 and 4 Paul sets forward three things that government is charged and mandated by God to do. What I'd like to do as you just look at verses 3 and 4, I'd like you just to note with me the flow of the passage. You can do this in in your own Bible study and you can do this in any passage of Scripture. I think it's especially helpful and important in this 13th chapter. When you look at those first four verses, just notice how this passage flows. T

There is a main command first of all. That is the beginning of verse 1. Verse 1 calls that every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. There it is. There is the imperative. There's the command. That's what is laid upon all of us. We're all called to do that.

Then, the reason. The reason is in the end of that first verse because there is no authority except from God. You're submitting to authority and you're submitting to authority because there is no authority that has been established except what God has

established. In effect, you are submitting to God as you submit to authority. The inference in that in verse 2 is pretty clear. To resist government is to resist God. To resist those in authority because God has established those authorities is in fact to resist God.

The explanation for that then we're going to step into this morning in the first part of verse 3. There's an inference from that. The inference from that is do what's good. If you want to stay out of trouble, then be good. That's a pretty simple principle.

Then the warning that comes in verse 4. The warning is because the government does not bear the sword in vain. Then, the explanation is because the government takes the role of being God's avenger. With that kind of flow in our minds, let's step into these two verses, verses 3 and 4.

Three mandates for government. Let's begin with verse 3 again. It reads like this. "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." Before we even look at the first point of the outline, we should just note that this 3rd verse is something of a proverbial statement. It's almost like a wisdom statement that you would pull out of Proverbs. When Paul says that if you're good, then you're going to receive approval from the government. That wasn't always true even in Paul's life. This is a proverbial statement of wisdom, a general truth. This is not an absolute truth that assures you every time you do good the government is going to pat you on the back and say good job or well done. The apostle Paul took beatings even though he was walking obviously in obedience to God. He experienced the abuse of government on occasion. This is a statement that is not to be understood as an absolute as much as it is to be true in general.

Paul says in verse 3 if a government is going to restrain evil and is going to promote good, what is the first thing that's needed? The first thing that's needed is there must be a standard of what's right and wrong. There must be a standard of what's right and wrong. It presupposes that. We know what that standard is. You've got it either in your hand or on your phone or some other form. It's the Bible. The Bible is God's absolute standard to us of what's right and wrong. Paul obviously knows that's the case too. When he writes this, he is presupposing that if government is going to accomplish

good and try to restrain evil, there is going to have to be some measure, some means of having established that.

The problem today of course is that we don't have that. We don't have that absolute standard of right and wrong. We have rejected God's truth. We've rejected God's guidance. We've lost our moral compass. We no longer have the capacity either governmentally or individually to determine what's right or what's wrong. It's not anywhere but I think dead on to say that in many respects our government today calls good evil and evil good. You see it nearly every day.

Just this last week the governor of Minnesota and the governor of the state of Washington signed into legislation in those states that are already everything that God calls good they're already calling evil and what God calls evil they're calling it good. They've already put in the law so many things to cover but they added these two additional laws. These two additional laws basically said to anybody else in this country you are welcome to come to Minnesota and you're welcome to come to Washington because here we will help you take the life of your unborn baby. Here we will help those perform medical malpractice on you because you're caught up in the deception of your sexual identity. It is a sad place for government entities to be calling good evil and evil good. As I'm reading my Bible it appears to me that that's exactly what's happening. Come to Minnesota. We'll help you take the life of your unborn child. Come to Minnesota. We'll give you drugs and perform surgeries that will transition you from how God created you into something that is part of your confusion at this moment in your life. And the same thing in the state of Washington. We're going to speak more to that in a couple of weeks when we talk about the citizen's responsibility to government, but I think Paul tees it up for us here in that way.

Even in secular, godless, atheistic countries there is some sense of right and wrong. there are some things that universally are viewed by governments as being wrong. Generally speaking, the taking of life, murder across all the spectrums of politics and ideology is viewed as being wrong. There are some things like that. But here it speaks to the fact that that there must be an understanding of what's good for the governments to do good. There must be an understanding of what is evil for the government to restrain evil.

The other thing of course is that government can't make people good. The government can't make people good, but it can punish people who do bad. That's what it can do. Someone said, "A government cannot create heaven on earth but by God's common grace, a government can prevent hell on earth." I think that speaks to that. We also know that even a bad government is better than no government. Our heart goes out to the people of Sudan, that country that has been war-torn and in such a bad way for so long and now back to civil war. It's moving towards a state of anarchy, but even a bad government is better than total anarchy is what Paul would say to us I think.

When you look at that, James is the one who speaks to this matter and he says in chapter 4 verse 1: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask." He is simply saying to us that when you think in terms of the two mandates that God has given to government and God has given to the church, the government can restrain evil through legislation. Through law, the government can hold it in check to some degree. But it's only the gospel that can bring the cure to the human heart. That's the two side-by-side. The government can do its part in restraining evil but it can never make bad people good and it can't make good people better. But it can hold in check and give some sense of control. The first thing government does is to restrain evil.

The second thing that God has mandated government to do is that government is to be God's servant for good. Look at the first part of verse 4; "...for he is God's servant for your good." That opening statement of verse 4 brings to mind everybody's favorite quote about the government: Hi, I'm here from the government and I'm here to help you. You all thought Ronald Reagan thought that up but that was the apostle Paul who thought that up. He said one of the things government is to do is government is to do good. It is to be a servant for good. When Paul says that I don't think he's trying to give us a full or political philosophy here. I think he does offer a word to us here that helps us stay somewhat balanced. When you think about differing views of government, it is easy to swing to one side or swing way to the other side. I think Paul is saying listen. There is a place for government. We shouldn't adopt a view of government that says everything

government does is bad. We shouldn't swing so far to the point where we don't want government at all. Paul doesn't give us that choice. I think swinging to the other side is probably to miss it too and to look and see government as being the savior, that government is going to accomplish and do everything that we need.

What it looks to me like what Paul is doing here is how is that the government is going to do good. For he is God's servant. Government is God's servant for good. What is some of the good that government does? One of the things government should be good at doing is maintaining and setting forth justice. God is always concerned about justice. Micah the prophet said these are the things that God requires of you, O man, that you do justice. Government should have high on its list of priorities that it wants to bring about justice to the servants that are under it. A sense of equality so that all of its citizens have an equal standing before government. We don't have different tiers and different opportunities, but rather there is a sense of equality that we're all treated the same under the law. Government can protect. Government should preserve. All of these things I think would fall within that.

From the perspective of a Christian worldview, of course what we would say today is yes, it's true, but to do that government has to have a sense of what's right and wrong. Government has to have an understanding of the moral absolutes. Once we've lost our way there, we've lost our way. I think Paul brings to mind that in the context of God's mandate for government to restrain evil and promote that which is good.

Look at this last one. The third mandate. Government is God's temporal avenger of evil. The last part of verse 4r: "...for he is God's servant for your good. 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 question that often arises when people are reading and studying Romans 13 and verse 4 has to do with this matter of capital punishment. Paul makes that statement in that 4th verse that brings that question to mind.

Before we jump into our notes, let me just have a couple of preliminary comments that are not in your notes but I think are necessary to understand what's going on here. The first one is simply this. This is not the central passage in the Bible dealing with this matter of capital punishment. We don't go to Romans 13 and say this is

where God has established this principle and this is why we believe that this is still what God would have for us today. There are other places as we'll see where that is laid out. What Paul does do in Romans 13:4 he is certainly allowing for that to be a possibility. The sword that he speaks of is symbolic all through Scripture of death and of judgment. There is a consistent picture throughout Scripture, Old and New Testaments, that when the writers of Scripture speak of a sword, sometimes it is in a very literal way and sometimes it's in a symbolic way. But even in the literal way, it is often times in the context of judgment, often in the context of that which is speaking of death. What you and I are forbidden to do, I believe, that God is giving government responsibility to do. We're going to make mention of this again in just a little bit, but you might remember back in chapter 12 and verse 19 when we were in that passage dealing with our enemies and God says you don't avenge yourself. You leave that to God. God will take care of that. Vengeance is mine, we saw. And so now here we come to this and we have a verse that is talking about vengeance and there's someone who is the avenger. The distinction that needs to be made is in chapter 12 and verse 19. He is speaking to individual believers here. In chapter 13 he is talking about mandates as it relates to the responsibilities that God has given to governments. Those are two very distinct things.

Let's look just briefly at the passages of Scripture that speak to this matter of capital punishment. Let's do so with a sense of sensitivity that this issue requires and calls for us today. we go back to Genesis chapter 9. In Genesis chapter 9, God establishes the institution of government for the good of society. Marriage and family and in the beginning of Genesis, Genesis 9, God establishes government. The very first charge that God gives to the government in Genesis 9 has to do with this matter of capital punishment. Look at verse 5: "And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man his blood shall be shed, for God made man in His own image." Now obviously again, as I just said, these are weighty words. This first law that God gives to government is this matter of capital punishment. It is rooted and grounded in creation. It's rooted and grounded in creation. This is not man's idea. Just as in Genesis 1 and 2, it wasn't man who thought

up marriage. It was God who thought up marriage and God who defined it. Now the same thing is true here.

In this matter of capital punishment, God is reminding His people that He is instituting this. He is giving this responsibility to government. He delegates to man because there is no authority except as God has established that authority. In this instance, murder is the ultimate show of contempt for God. It is the ultimate way that one human can show another human they have no regard at all for the laws of God, for the principles by which He has set forward his creation. In effect, it is an assault on the image of God. That's why this is so important to realize what's happening in Genesis 9.

Then you jump to the next book in Exodus chapter 20. In Exodus chapter 20 verse 16, we have the giving of the Decalogue and the giving of the 10 Commandments and we come to the 6th Commandment. God says in that 6th Commandment you shall not murder. It is important to note that word "murder" is used 49 times in the Old Testament. Every time that particular Hebrew word is used it means murder. There's another word that is translated kill. All killing is not to be understood as murder. There are instances where taking a life is not murder. For instance, God's going to tell His people when they go into the promised land that the cup of iniquity is full. God's going to use His people to bring judgment upon the Canaanites. He is going to tell them to go into that land and to kill all of those Canaanites as part of His judgment upon them. But that was not murder. In Revelation when Jesus returns, whether you understand it literally or symbolically, the meaning is the same. It says that when He returns, He will kill the armies of the earth by the sword of His mouth. There is a necessary distinction between killing and taking a life under that definition, and murder and the taking of a life under that definition. Those are different things. You shall not murder God says in that 6th command.

Then you come to John chapter 8. In John chapter 8, you have the interchange between Jesus and the Pharisees with regard to the adulterous woman. This passage is often lifted up as a critique of this matter of capital punishment. The very first thing you have to say as you study your Bible is pay attention to the context. What is the context going on in John 8? It is not a discussion about capital punishment. Jesus is not giving His teaching on capital punishment. What is happening is that the Pharisees have come

to Jesus and they want to trap Him. They want to put Him on the horns of a dilemma between the law of Rome and the law of God. They figure if they can get Him hooked on either one of those then they can kill Him, either for treason to Rome or blasphemy against the law. That's the context. What does Jesus do in the wisdom that only Jesus has? He says to these men who have brought this woman, and notice they didn't bring the man who was caught in the act of adultery. They only brought the woman, which was a violation of the law. What Jesus says to them is he who is without fault you go ahead and pick up and cast the first stone. Jesus didn't mean you have to be perfect to carry out the mandates of government.

What he meant is there were very strict guidelines for the application of capital punishment in the Old Testament. As it related to this matter of adultery, there were strict requirements. These Pharisees had violated and stepped all over most of those requirements. I think he says to them whoever of you who is without fault as it pertains to the application of the law in the life of this woman that you supposedly have caught in adultery, why don't you be the first one to pick up the stone because the one who witnessed it would be a part of that process. But they don't do that. Number one, because this was a setup from the beginning. But Jesus does say let he who is without fault pick up a stone and cast it. He does not condemn her because they had not followed the prescribed means of the Old Testament law. But neither does He condone her sin, and He sends her away.

The last one is in Acts chapter 25. In Acts chapter 25 and verse 10. Paul was standing before Festus. He said "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and I have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." He simply acknowledges that under Roman law there was such a thing as capital punishment. He volunteers himself to that punishment if he is found to have done something wrong. Paul in this passage again just gives us an insight into how it is that we perhaps should be understanding this issue.

With that in mind, let's step back and think of some of the concerns that certainly need to be addressed when we think about this matter of capital punishment. There are

a number of them. We can't cover all of them, but we'll cover these that I've listed before you. The first one that is often mentioned is it's not a deterrent. Capital punishment is not a deterrent. Some of these concerns that are lifted up are quite subjective and I suppose you could find somebody who has numerous studies that show capital punishment is not a deterrent, and then there's probably sociologists and anthropologists who have studies that show that it is a deterrent. That debate would have to wait for another day. But here's the point. The Bible doesn't ever speak with regard to capital punishment as being a deterrent. What is the basis by which God established capital punishment in Genesis 9? It was that it was an attack against the very image and likeness of God. It was the ultimate assault against God's creative order. That was the basis of it. It wasn't to do this because it will act as a deterrent. The reality is we know that a convicted murderer will not murder again if the capital punishment penalty is carried out. That certainly would be a deterrent in that sense.

A second objection or concern is Romans 12. Romans 12 says we should not seek vengeance. We've already touched on that. That same thing that I said previously applies. God has given certain things for individuals. He has given certain mandates to government. They're not to be mixed up. Here's the greater point to get. He is going to say it again in 13:8. In 13:8 he is going to talk about the principle of love. Very often opponents of capital punishment say this seems a violation of the principle of love, of grace, of mercy to carry out this kind of ultimate punishment. Again, there are consequences to bad choices that people make even within the context of God's love, even within the context of God's grace and God's mercy. All of us could mention things in our own lives where we made poor choices and God in His mercy, grace and love still loved us, still was merciful to us, still was gracious to us, but there were still consequences. I think that is in part what we would understand here as God makes this point through Paul in Galatians 6. Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows that shall he also reap. This is not vengeance that is individual. This is the avenger of the government as Paul says in that 3rd verse.

Thirdly, some would say it's cruel and unusual. Again, that becomes a kind of subjective discussion. What do you mean by cruel and unusual? All punishment in some respects can be seen as being painful and hurtful. But justice in some regard

requires that at times. There are certain consequences again. I don't think anybody would be in support of torture or something that would fall into that category. But there are certainly crimes that are committed that are so heinous that inflicting capital punishment on the perpetrator might very well fall within the purview of the consequences of those bad decisions and those choices.

The fourth one is it is unfairly administered. It is unfairly administered. I think this argument out of all of the arguments that we've looked at, this is an argument about implementation and about the administration of capital punishment. It doesn't really speak to the moral issue of capital punishment in the sense of why did God mandate this to government. But it should be the concern of every one of us that capital punishment in this country and in this state is carried out in a way that is always just fair and equitable. It is my personal opinion if in the case where there is not 100% certainty, if there is uncertainty as to the guilt of that party involved in that crime, then I would be with those who would say let's move very slowly. Let's be very careful. But the idea of the administering of capital punishment does not speak to God's command and concerns to carry it out.

Then the last one. How can you support capital punishment and oppose abortion? This one is often referred to as the whole life ethic. The question is how can you be promoting the sanctity of life and at the same time promoting the taking of life? the answer to me is simply this. God speaks very clearly about both of those. He commands government to engage in capital punishment. It is His mandate. It is not ours. It's His. It is His image that has been violated. It is the assault against His character that He underscores in Genesis 9. He has commanded government to carry out that punishment for certain crimes.

On the other hand, abortion is clearly condemned by Scripture. There are countless verses, as you know if you've been at Covenant very long, that there cannot be any doubt that God holds to the sanctity of all of life from conception all the way to the grave. The mandate in both is very clear. There is no sense of disregard for the sanctity of life in the carrying out of the penalty of capital punishment, because it is the very issue of the sanctity of life that God put in place when He required government to enact capital punishment.

Again, my sense is this. If you have a problem with any of that, then you have a problem either with the word of God or with God in terms of what He has said. I'm not saying that everybody has to agree with what I just said, but I am saying some of the things that we lift up are not so much a problem with the human side of it as it is with understanding what it is that God has put in place. God is the one who has mandated this matter of capital punishment in Genesis 9 and there's nothing in the rest of the progress of Scripture that says that He has listed that. In fact, what we've already looked at, that establishes whether it was Jesus or whether was Paul or whether it was any other writer of Scripture that they left that in place. So a hard issue and an issue over which Christians will disagree. Even as you discuss in community group, always remember to be gracious, be humble, and recognize that these are issues over which Christians can disagree and still love Jesus equally. Every government is established by God to carry out His purposes.

What do we take away? The state's mandate is to promote peace. That's what God has given to the state. The church's mandate is to advance the gospel. What are we supposed to do? We should be praying for both. That's what Paul does in 1 Timothy chapter 2. Listen to what he says in verse 1: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people, for kings and for all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." There's the mandate. There is the mandate for the church. Pray for government and carry out the Great Commission. Bring the gospel. That's the cure for the human heart. The government can constrain and check, but only the gospel can cure our problems.

That's what we lift up this morning. We lift up the cross. We lift up Christ. We lift up His work on our behalf. We lift up the forgiveness of sin. We do so simply by acknowledging that what God asks of us is not that we do something for Him, but that we accept what He's done for us. And that is to believe that what Jesus did is all that needed to be done. To believe that what He did provided for your sin and mine. To believe that when we put our trust in Christ alone God gives us the gift of eternal life. we invite you to believe that this morning.

Let's pray. Father God, we're grateful again for Your word. These are hard things. These are difficult things. We want to understand. We want to discern. We want to know the heart and mind of God. We want to live as salt and light in this world. We want to live as light in the midst of the wicked and perverse generation. Lord, help us to do that well. Help us to encourage each other in this process. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.