

What's Right With the Government? **By David Feddes**

Humorist Mark Twain said, "No man's life, liberty, or property are safe while the legislature is in session."

Old-time comedian Will Rogers cracked, "I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts."

P. J. O'Rourke joked, "Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."

Many of us enjoy anti-government jokes, and even some politicians enjoy them. Ronald Reagan once said, "Government's view of the economy can be summarized in a few short phrases: If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it."

There's an old saying, "Don't beat a dead horse." I came across an Internet item which says:

When you discover you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount.

However, we in the government often try other strategies. These include:

- Change riders.
- Buy a stronger whip.
- Say things like, "This is the way we have always ridden this horse."
- Increase the standards to ride a dead horse.
- Appoint a blue-ribbon panel to study the horse.
- Create a training program to increase our riding ability.
- Compare the state of dead horses in today's environment.
- Pass legislation declaring, "This horse is not dead."
- Blame the horse's parents.
- Provide additional funding to increase the horse's performance.
- Declare, "No horse is too dead to beat."
- Declare the horse is "better, faster, and cheaper" dead.
- Say this horse was procured with aliveness as an independent variable.
- Appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the farm where it was born.
- Promote the horse to a supervisory position.

It can be fun to joke about government, but many people aren't in a joking mood about their government. They get disgusted and just plain mad. They don't respect politicians and bureaucrats. They don't trust courts and police.

Now of course people in power aren't perfect; they have many faults. And even if they're honest, they have limits; even when they want to help, there are many things they can't do. That's why the Bible says, "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save" (Psalm 146:3). So it can be healthy not to count on government too much or have too high an opinion of it.

But it's not healthy to have too low an opinion of government. If you were asked, "What's wrong with the government?" you could probably give a long list of problems. But what if you were asked, "What's right with the government?" That's what we're going to focus on here: what's right with the government. In Romans 13, the Bible says:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have

been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

Established by God?

It might not be hard to accept what the Bible says here if only our government were perfect. But what if it's not? The writer of these words, St. Paul, says twice that the authorities have been established by God. In an election it seems that authorities are established by money, campaign promises, debating skill, and slamming their opponents, so is it really true to say they are established by God? The voters may have chosen them, but did God choose them?

Three times Paul calls the authorities God's servants. Politicians are called many things—some of them unrepeatable—but "God's servant" isn't usually one of them. Paul says that the authorities promote good and punish wrong. Didn't he know about unjust laws? Didn't he know about police brutality? If government is supposed to punish wrongdoers, what about criminals who are caught red-handed but go free on a legal technicality?

Well, just in case you think that Paul wrote Romans 13 at a time when government was all that it ought to be, just in case you think his words don't apply to imperfect governments, let's look at the situation Paul lived in. Paul didn't live under a perfect government. He lived under the Roman emperors.

We may not always like the way candidates conduct themselves during elections, but in the Roman Empire, there were no elections. We may think our government doesn't do enough for working people, but back then, slavery was common. We may think government should protect unborn babies from abortion, but Rome's government didn't even protect babies who had already been born; many unwanted babies were left outside to die. We may think our government uses public funds for some questionable projects, but what about the government-sponsored games of Paul's day, where gladiators fought to the death to entertain others? We may not be fond of tax audits and revenue officials, but in Paul's day the tax collectors were notorious for lining their own pockets with a share of the money they collected. We may not like the character of our leaders today, but at the time Paul was writing, Nero was emperor of Rome, and not long before, Caligula had been emperor. I don't want to get into all the sickening details, but Caligula and Nero were sexual perverts and cold-blooded murderers.

St. Paul knew the darker side of government through personal experience. He was publicly whipped without a trial (Acts 16:22-24). He once sat in prison for more than two years without ever being convicted on any formal charge. Felix the governor kept him there in the hopes that Paul would give him a bribe, and also as a favor to Paul's opponents (Acts 24:26). Later on, Paul spent even more time in prison and was ultimately beheaded, simply because he happened to be a Christian at a time when

Nero wanted Christians dead. So it's safe to say that when Paul wrote Romans 13, he was under no illusions. He could have come up with a very long list of what was wrong with the government.

But instead the Lord moved Paul to remind the Romans and all of us what's right with government. He writes, "The authorities that exist have been established by God." That statement is astonishing, almost unbelievable—but it's the key to understanding what's right with the government even when there's a great deal wrong with it. When we're tempted to lose all respect for government, we need to look at it again in the light of God's power and plan.

When Paul wrote the book of Romans, he was addressing people who had recently become Christians. These new Christians had a new ruler, King Jesus, and they may have been tempted to think that as followers of this perfect Lord, they could reject their earthly rulers, especially those who weren't Christians. But Paul set the record straight. He made it clear that these earthly authorities, even with all their faults, even if they didn't acknowledge God at all, were still put in place by God to serve his purposes. The Romans didn't need to be reminded of what's wrong with government, and neither do we. We know all about it, and it makes us angry. That's when we need to realize what's right with government: that despite their flaws, people who have authority have received it from God.

Preventing Hell on Earth

What good are authority structures? Why does God establish them at all? One of the main reasons is to keep evil in check and to impose order on a society that might otherwise be chaos. Government is not capable of turning a bad society into a good one. But it can help prevent a bad situation from getting worse.

When Paul wrote Romans 13, the Roman government was far from ideal, to say the least, but things were far worse in many of the barbarian regions outside the empire. At least under Roman law people couldn't kill and plunder each other as they pleased. Also, the empire had a system of money, roads, and communication, which brought increased order and prosperity to a situation that might otherwise have been complete disorder.

The only thing worse than a bad government is no government at all. Police brutality is bad; anarchy is worse. Life without government isn't freedom; it's chaos. We've seen this in various countries where bad governments have been toppled, only to give way to anarchy where various factions keep destroying property, killing each other, and leaving the country worse off than ever. Perhaps the most important job of any government is simply to keep people from destroying each other, protecting the weak from the strong, and maintaining some kind of stability. Even if a government isn't providing heaven on earth, at least it may be preventing hell on earth. So what's right with the government? It's there! That may not sound like much, but it's a lot better than having no government at all.

We the People

When we think about living under an elected government, we have special reason to thank God for it. When we're feeling angry about our politicians and police, it doesn't hurt to remind ourselves that even at it's worst, a freely elected system of

government is better than most. Even if we're disappointed with the government, it's downright foolish to say that any change would be good, that the situation couldn't get any worse than it is. Is that so? Look at some other parts of the world, and you'll see that it can get a lot worse. Let's keep seeking to improve our society, but let's not be so foolish or ungrateful that we don't appreciate the freedom and stability that we enjoy.

I read about a shareholders' meeting where the chief executive officer of the corporation began his report by droning on and on with complaints about the government and all its taxes. Finally a woman who held stock in the company got tired of listening and stood up. "I'm glad I live in a free country. I enjoy paying taxes to support my government. Now please stop complaining and get to the point. Tell us how the company did." It's easy to complain about what's wrong with our leaders, but sometimes it's better to remember what's right with them. Besides, let's face it: in our system we usually get the leaders we deserve. When we don't like what's happening, we often like to blame a few people at the top—but who put them there? We did. "We the people." If we don't like our leaders, we not only have the freedom of speech to voice our complaints, but we also have free elections to vote our convictions and pick somebody else.

I suspect that a big reason some of us can't see what's right with the government is that we expect too much of it and then become bitter when it doesn't meet our excessive expectations. Our anger isn't just due to the well-publicized sins of our leaders. If we're honest, the thing that bothers us most is the fact that things haven't been going as well for us as we'd like, and we need somebody to blame. So if corporate earnings are down, we blame the government. If people are out of work, we blame the government. If our families are falling apart, we blame the government. If our educational system isn't what we want, we blame the government. If health care isn't what we want, we blame the government. Surely our lives would be better if only the government would get its act together! We demand that the government get even more involved in education, child care, banking and finance, medicine, research and development, and whatever else we'd like improved—all without raising taxes, of course—and then we complain when we end up with a monstrous bureaucracy and a huge budget deficit. We make an idol out of government, and then, when our idol doesn't perform all the miracles we expected, we're upset.

But how can any government be expected to make a perfect society out of imperfect people? Even if our government were doing its job perfectly (which it never will), marriages would still fall apart, parents would still abuse their children, people would keep on using drugs and alcohol, many would still get AIDS, students would still not pay attention to their teachers, some companies would still go bankrupt, and many people would still lose their jobs. That's because much of what happens in society is simply beyond the control of government.

To be great, a nation needs more than a government which upholds individual rights; it also needs citizens who uphold their responsibilities. Ultimately, a nation is only as good as the sum total of its citizens, no matter what the government does. As C. S. Lewis said, no rearrangement of bad eggs can make a good omelette. As long as people are sinful and resources are limited, there are going to be problems that no government can solve. Government can encourage good things and punish crimes, but it can't make a perfect society out of imperfect people, and God never intended it to.

Politics and Faith

Another thing government can't do, and shouldn't try to do, is to create faith in God. The Bible says God establishes the authorities; it doesn't say the authorities establish God. The Lord has not assigned government the task of spreading faith in him. The government's task is to defend the rights of people in relation to each other, not to make people right with God.

Some of the saddest chapters in history have been written when political power is used to force a particular religion on people. Political force can't change human hearts or lead them to God, and every time it tries, the results are disastrous. Religious persecution can produce hatred and bitterness, but it has never yet produced a transformed life. Even things like government-sponsored prayers often do more harm than good. These prayers are seldom directed to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, they usually end up invoking some vague higher power, addressing the prayers "to whom it may concern." That's not genuine prayer; it borders on blasphemy.

Government can't create faith, and it shouldn't try. There is something very much right with the government when it stays away from promoting faith or trying to enforce all the commands of God. Instead of trying to get the government to do the work of the church, we Christians should celebrate the freedom of religion that we enjoy under our political system.

The fact that God has established the governing authorities for an important but very limited purpose helps to set us free from the trap of expecting from the government more than it can deliver. Sometimes in the middle of an election campaign, the candidates give the impression that if they are elected, all will be sweetness and light, but if their opponents are elected, we face nothing but disaster. If we know the Bible, we know better. The government may be established by God, but that doesn't mean it *is* God. God himself is on the throne of the universe, and our destiny is in his hands, not in the hands of any political party.

We aren't doing ourselves any favors when we expect a government solution to every problem. Even if everything were right with the government, that wouldn't make everything right with us. Many of our most serious problems are personal, not political. Sometimes it's helpful to stop asking what's wrong with the government and instead deal with what's wrong with us. A healthy relationship with Jesus and a new perspective on life will help us far more than any politician or judge ever could.

This means that the most important decision you face is not what candidates you should vote for, but who is going to be the Lord of your life. Jesus Christ can do for you and your family many things that the government can never do. The Bible says, "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes" (Psalm 118:9). Your happiness doesn't depend on whether the right people are running the government for the next few years. Your ultimate happiness depends on whether Jesus is running your life. Politicians come and go, but the Kingdom of God lasts forever.

A Healthy Attitude

Once we know the Lord, we can also relate to the government in a healthier way because we recognize what's right with the government: God has established it for an important purpose. So we submit to the government and obey its laws (unless, of

course, a particular law is in direct conflict with God's law). We submit not just because we're scared of being punished, but because it's right and pleasing to God. As the Bible puts it, "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience."

In a country with free elections and free speech, we do more than submit, of course. Some of us run for political office and win. All of us have a hand in choosing who will represent us as leaders. All of us have a voice in holding them accountable to what God expects of government. In other words, we ourselves have a role to play as governing authorities.

As a Christian, I want to use this power wisely. I don't want government to force people to follow Jesus; that's not the government's job. This doesn't mean, however, that Christian people should stay out of politics, or that our beliefs about right and wrong should have nothing to do with the way we vote. The Bible teaches us the value of every human life, and it's the task of government to protect the lives and defend the basic rights of all people. That's why Christians urged the government to abolish slavery; that's why Christians pressured the government to affirm civil rights; that's why many Christians today want the government to protect unborn children by putting a stop to abortion. It's not a matter of forcing religion on people; it is simply protecting vulnerable people from being exploited or destroyed by others. We start by recognizing what's right with the government, and then we do what we can to make it better yet.

But even when the people in power fall short of perfection, they serve an important purpose and need our support. Romans 13 says, "They are God's servants who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." God wants Christians to pay their taxes in full, to pay them willingly. Is that so hard in a nation with such freedoms and privileges? When you lie on your tax forms—maybe some cash income that you can get away without reporting—you may fool the government, but you're not fooling the God who established it.

Taxes aren't the only thing we owe. Our leaders need our respect and moral support. It's a lot easier to criticize and mock politicians than it is to be one. The same is true of law enforcement; it's difficult and dangerous. Most of these men and women don't deserve ridicule; we owe them respect and honor.

There's another way we can support our leaders, according to the Bible, perhaps the most important of all, and that is to pray for them. Please do that right now.

Prayer: Father in heaven, thank you for the rights and freedoms that we enjoy. Thank you for the people who take up the challenge of becoming involved in government. Give wisdom and a passion for justice to all our leaders at every level. Give courage and a sense of fairness to soldiers and police officers and courts. Help us as citizens to influence government in a positive way as we have opportunity. Amen.

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