

Attitudes about Authority
Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:11-17

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I'm not sure if you've noticed... but going through these pandemic circumstances has exposed whatever attitudes we might have about authority, because we are all experiencing authority being exercised upon our lives in ways that we have never really encountered before.

When we first heard about this unknown virus starting to spread in the city of Wuhan, many of us were a bit shocked at how the Chinese gov't responded by locking down the entire city in an attempt to prevent the outbreak from spreading any further.

At the time, those of us in the West considered this to be a drastic and draconian action – an imposition on rights and freedoms, and political pundits speculated whether or not such an action would even be possible in Western countries, because we are used to going about our business and our daily lives with what we consider to be minimal interference from the gov't regarding what we can or can't do.

Well – we found out that it was possible only a few months later when the virus began to spread rapidly across the globe causing significant outbreaks in Italy, Spain, Iran, and then the U.K and New York – and drastic lock-down measures had to be implemented in response.

And here in Alberta, we received our first taste of public health restrictions, limitations and closures back in mid-March and we have had to put up with the gov't exercising this authority in our day to day lives and activities in various degrees ever since then.

In fact, the bulk of our pandemic experience is actually shaped by how our lives have been affected by the gov't exercising authority over our day-to-day activities as opposed to our actual state of health. The truth is that not everyone is going to get sick from this virus, and the statistics show that the majority of those who do, experience only mild symptoms and recover on their own.

However – every single one of us is affected in some way by the health restrictions, limitations and closures that the gov't has used its authority to put into effect.

We're all wearing masks in public buildings and sanitizing our hands as we enter, social distancing, limiting contact to family cohorts, not having parties or get-togethers or traveling for vacations. We're working from home, going to school online, and some have had to close down their businesses for periods of time and we've all experienced how the restrictions prevent us from worshipping together in person like we used to.

There is no one who is unaffected by what our gov'ts have mandated during this pandemic.

And as I've mentioned - this is a new experience for us. We're not used to this level of gov't involvement in our daily lives and business and it is eliciting reactions of frustration and resentment, anger, protest, belligerence, and defiance.

And although our political leaders and public health officials are the natural lightning rods for such reactions – and we've all seen examples of this in our social media feeds and we all know about the high-profile cases that have recently made news headlines - if we have any sense of self awareness, and if we believe that God truly works in ALL circumstances to bring about good and our sanctification... then I hope we can see that underneath the all opinions and criticisms we have about our gov't this is really all about our attitudes and beliefs concerning – authority.

When it gets down to it, this is really all about our attitudes towards authority.

And no matter how sophisticated a critique we can spin, or how justified we think our frustrations are – because of how sin affects our human nature, when it comes to authority, we all have the same reaction when that authority tells us what we must do... you know what I'm talking about!

When someone says to us – *You must do this!* We're like – *Oh ya! You're not the boss of me!*

Now as I said, we might say something with a bit more sophistication, along the lines of *"how come unelected health officials are making these decisions – we didn't elect them!"* or *"don't these elected politicians realize they work for us?! We didn't put them in power to do this! They ought to resign immediately – how can we fire them!"*

Or we might justify our belligerence and defiance by claiming that our constitutional rights and freedoms are being violated, or that the gov't hasn't provided enough evidence that their restrictions are warranted, or that some doctor or medical study suggests contradictory evidence to what the gov't is putting forward.

Or we might even make an appeal to divine authority – that gov't restrictions and limitations are attempting to prevent us from doing what **God** "*commands*" they are morally wrong!! and thus we must obey God rather than the gov't.

Now- putting forward sophisticated criticisms and complaints about gov't actions are part of how our liberal democracy system functions, as a side note – perhaps this experience will also motivate more people to learn how our system of government works and what we've already agreed to allow our system to authorize a gov't to do in such circumstances, instead of sounding like ignoramuses when we are spouting off on social media.

And we're fortunate to live in a country where voicing opinions, even incorrect ones, about our system does not land you in jail as a political dissident – refusing to abide by your bail conditions might – but not simple criticism.

And when the next election rolls around, if you are still convinced that the health restrictions and limitations and closures were the wrong decisions to make – then you have the ability to vote accordingly on that conviction in the next election.

And it might actually be the case that some constitutional rights were violated – but that needs to be determined in a court of law – and I’m not a constitutional lawyer or a judge, so I’m not qualified to make the arguments on this nor am I authorize to make a judgement about it – we’ll wait and see what the courts decide...

And it might be that the gov’t did not have enough evidence on hand, and maybe there was contradictory evidence and information – I’m not a gov’t insider, nor am I a medical researcher so I can’t really speak to those claims, I’m not an authority on such matters - we’ll have to wait and see what comes out in the wash...

So these critiques may be valid, the frustrations might be justified, and acting upon them via the legitimate avenues of our political system is certainly appropriate....

However – it does not excuse or dismiss what the Holy Spirit is revealing to exist in our hearts concerning our attitude towards authority, which in spite of the legitimacy of the

concerns that I’ve touched on, is seeping through in just about every instance that we can point to.

Oh yeah! You’re not the boss of me!

This is the foundation, the baseline, the drum beat, that fuels so much of how we are reacting to the gov’t exercising its authority in our lives right now.

And to make matters worse there are Christians justifying this attitude and legitimizing such reactions, and even pastors who are encouraging belligerence by appealing to God’s divine authority as something that somehow undermines the gov’ts authority over us.

Now as I said, I’m not a constitutional lawyer, or a judge, a gov’t insider or a medical researcher – but... I am an *ordained* minister of the Word – so, I actually have a responsibility to speak authoritatively about God’s authority when people are appealing to it, and making claims upon it, in order to justify their rebellious attitudes and actions towards civil authority.

So, I've had us read from Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 this morning and I think we can all clearly see that these passages state that our status as disciples of Jesus Christ, as children of God, in no way puts us above the civil authorities.

Romans 13:1 says *"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."* And 1 Peter 2:13 says *"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority"*

So, God's divine authority is actually the basis upon which we are to recognize our civil rulers' authority over us, it doesn't come from their personality or popularity or promises, or their last name or how many votes they received – the source of any authority is God himself and He is the foundation upon which civil gov't rests – regardless of whether that gov't acknowledges Him or not.

And church leaders who try to claim a sacred status as the Lords' servants that would place them above the "secular"

gov't– will find that these passages do not recognize or support such a sacred-over-secular dualism.

Instead, Paul states three times that gov't officials are in fact God's servants – who function for our good by acting on behalf of God to punish wrong doing and commending those who do good. And Paul's choice of words actually puts gov't officials on par with church leaders.

The first two instances where Paul calls them servants of God in vs. 4 he uses the typical word for servant – *diaconos*, but the third time in vs. 6 he uses the word *"letourgos."*

This is a religious term, which is related to our English word *"liturgy"*, and some bible versions translate it as *ministers*, and when Paul speaks about how we must pay our taxes he states it is because these "ministers" give their full-time to governing – and he uses the same phrase that is used to describe the Apostles' full-time dedication to their ministry of the Word and prayer in Acts 6:4.

So, all this is to say that divine authority is not something that we can use as claim to say that we are not under the authority of the civil gov't or somehow above the law.

And anyone who is making such a claim is in fact misusing their position as one of Christ's followers and they are *"rebellling against what God has instituted and... will bring judgment on themselves."* (vs.2)

And this judgement is likely to take the form of the gov't bringing the power of the sword to bear against them because as 1 Peter 2:14 says *"governors... are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."*

So, despite the outcry from far-right pundits and their supporters on social media... it is **not** shameful for the gov't to be punishing pastors for breaking the laws regarding health restrictions – its actually quite embarrassing and shameful for pastors and churches to be putting themselves in that position and requiring the State to take such actions against them.

In contrast Peter admonishes us in vs. 12 *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us"* and again in vs. 15-16 *"For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves."*

How appropriate for our times brothers and sisters. Right now, our non-Christian society is accusing us of doing wrong and causing harm for insisting that sexuality and marriage is intended by God for one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant partnership. Recent conversion therapy by-laws passed by the City of Calgary, and those being drafted by the Federal Gov't are specifically aimed in our direction as a result of what we teach on these matters.

Right now, in these pandemic circumstances the Church has an opportunity to be doing good deeds and living good lives in such a way that non-Christians would appreciate us in spite of

our teachings which they believe to be wrong, and thus their “ignorant talk” about us on such matters would be silenced.

But that is not the media coverage that Christianity is getting right now is it... instead the public is seeing an example of how the definition of what it means to live as “free people” is being twisted and misused and being used as a cover-up for actions that are seen as harmful and putting the public at risk. This is a terrible witness – and it will only serve the Devil’s purposes to strengthen the public’s perception that the Church is doing wrong in other matters as well.

So, if you come across fellow Christians who are supporting this terrible witness and insisting this is a matter of standing up for religious freedom – please remind them gently that 1 Peter 2:16 rebukes them for damaging our witness by misusing that freedom as an excuse to cover up rebellious attitudes about authority.

You see brothers and sisters; this was the main reason why Peter and Paul gave these instructions to the early church – its

all about our gospel witness to a society that does not accept or understand a biblical worldview and who are suspicious of the ways in which we are different from them.

So, I pray the Holy Spirit moves our hearts of Christians across our nation to make this our main concern right now as well! And that’s also a great motivation for you to get out and get blessing people in the name of Jesus, so that at least those who know Valleyview will glorify God because of the good deeds that we are blessing them with.

And its important to emphasize that these passages are concerned with our public witness... because someone always objects... to how these scriptures authoritatively instruct us to submit ourselves to the State, by referring to Nazi Germany or Apartheid South Africa.

So, let’s clarify then that these passages were written before Hitler or Stalin or Mao and other such tyrants and the horrible atrocities which they lead their citizens to commit in

allegiance to the State - Peter and Paul are not addressing those kinds of situations here.

They are not writing full-fledged treatises on all aspects and dynamics of the relationship between the church and state what how that ought to function – which is what we’ll be looking at that in greater detail next Sunday.

And neither are Peter and Paul putting forward a set of guidelines for determining when rulers are leading people astray and must be resisted - which can happen just as easily with church leaders by the way...

The primary purpose of these passages is to speak into situations where it is necessary to call out the attitudes we have in our hearts about authority and help Christians to realize that if we are truly under divine authority, if we are genuinely submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we should be able to recognize how God’s authority is hierarchically delegated throughout the rest of His creation and there should be no issue in submitting ourselves to it... because we

know any and all authority that we come across in this creation - is sourced from the Lord.

This needs to be our foundation, our baseline, our drum beat, our attitude that underlines how we respond to the gov’t exercising the additional authority in our lives right now during this pandemic.

And brothers and sisters, here’s where this really hits home for us. If we are struggling to deal with the gov’t exercising its authority in our lives right now, if we feel like reacting with “You’re not the boss of me!” then we need to realize that our struggles with civil authority is reflective of our deeper struggle, our own spiritual battle, with God’s ultimate authority over us.

The truth is that our sinful nature wants to resist God’s rightful authority over us. We’re ok with God’s ultimate authority, as a general concept that exists out there... but it’s a bit of a different story when it comes to us in specific commands that require actions of obedience.

The truth is that whatever emotions you might feel about God, whatever thoughts you might think about Him don't really count for anything unless you will put them into reality through recognizing His authority over you in specific concrete situations where you respond in actions of obedience. Jesus was pretty blunt about this – He said *“If you love me, keep my commands!”* (John 14:15) and the Apostle John echoes that in 1 John 2:4 *“Whoever says, “I know Jesus,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.”*

So, our attitude about authority needs to accept that it all comes from God and that is reflected in how we react to authority as it comes into our everyday lives.

And... having this kind of attitude also helps us to deal with the reality that God's delegated authority puts fallible, corruptible, sinful human beings – people just like ourselves – into gov't.

Brothers and sisters if we truly believe and trust that God is the source of all authority, then we can also trust that God will

hold gov't leaders – who are His servants - accountable for what they did with His authority. Paul gives us this much needed reminder in 12:19 the Lord will avenge, he will repay. Authority always comes with accountability

And this also means that God delegates His authority with a purpose. He intends to accomplish His plans and purpose for this world – and for each of our lives – through the delegation of His authority in His creation.

As we live under governors, rulers, premiers and prime ministers – we remember, and occasionally remind them - God is the ruler over all. And ultimately... He is the one that is really calling the shots, He is the one who makes things happen, it is He who is exercising authority in our lives.

So, our critiques and engagement with our gov't do not need to be driven by fear – but rather by faith in what the scripture authoritatively teaches us - that all authority comes from God.

That's a very different attitude isn't it.

Now brothers and sisters, there is a lot more that the scripture has to say about authority but this what we've covered this morning with respect to our attitude about it is foundational...

Its also a bit disconcerting to have the essential characteristic of our sinful human nature – *You're not the boss of me* – called out in our reactions to circumstances where we thought we were justified in our frustrations, or had legitimate criticisms. We didn't necessarily come prepared for being convicted about our sin's resistance in submitting to God's authority.

So, brothers and sisters, let me encourage you with the words that Jesus spoke to a paralyzed man whose friends had lowered him through the roof *"Your sins are forgiven!"*

And to silence the ignorance voices of those who accused Him of blasphemy in saying this Jesus' continued on and said *"I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."* Then he commanded the man *"Get up, take your mat and go home."*

Brothers and sisters – God's authority exercised over our lives is good and for our good, and it accomplishes what it requires from us – it does not leave us striving on our own.

Jesus' authority exercised in His command – get up and walk is what enables the paralyzed man to get up and walk.

So to brothers and sisters – be encouraged and trust that the Holy Spirit will work through the authority of scripture that we must submit ourselves to the governing authorities – to give each of us what we need to do this, and do so in such a way that it gives glory to Jesus Christ.

Hear the good news, believe it and trust it brothers and sisters What God requires of us, He supplies, What God commands, He enables through His authority in His commands.

Brothers and sisters - you have now been... Authorized, go and obey and be blessed. Amen.