

## The Rule and the Exception

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a time to remember and honor those who have given their lives to establish our nation and to preserve our freedoms. We remember in particular those who died in combat and the families who grieve for them. I remember my great aunt and uncle who mourned for my second cousin who was killed in Korea. Many years after it happened, I could still sense the agony of his parents and siblings when we visited them. They named a street for him in the little village of Rayland, Ohio. We should never forget, we must never forget the sacrifice others have made to make possible the freedoms we enjoy today. We also remember and honor those who served and survived and went on to live and then died from natural causes. In many cases their sacrifice was even greater than those who died in battle, for survivors live with their scars and relive the horrors of war in their memories for as long as they live. It is good for us to set aside a day to remember.

Memorial Day this year has added significance because our nation is still at war in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and because this year is an election year in which our country is deeply divided. On the one side there is a great outcry for change. On the other side there is a more cautious approach; yes, there needs to be change, but let's not "throw the baby out with the bath water." Some things in America are good the way they are and some other things will right themselves if we don't mess them up by trying to fix them. But, one thing is for sure regardless of who wins this year's presidential election. Our nation has been changing and it will continue to change, and not all of the changes are for the better. Roe vs. Wade for example was an evil change, leading to a holocaust for millions of babies. The recent court decision in California that legalizes homosexual marriages even after the electorate had solidly voted against it is another evil change, a further attack on traditional values and an affront to natural law and Biblical authority.

For we who hold dual citizenships: citizens of the United States of America but also, and foremost, citizens of the kingdom of God, it may be hard to know how to balance our allegiance to the nation with our allegiance to Christ. As citizens of the United States we want to always say and pray, "God bless America," but as citizens of the Kingdom of God, we know that if America doesn't bless God, God at some point will not continue to bless America. If we continue to legislate and accept changes that fly in the face of what God has commanded in His word, divine

2

judgment will be knocking on the door. I think it is already:  
**"knocking on the door."**

But as Shakespeare would put it, "here's the rub," what are we supposed to do? How do we balance our allegiance to America with our allegiance to Christ? What does God's word tell us? God's word tells us two things. The first thing it tells us is that we are to be good citizens of the nation to which we belong. We are to be good citizens regardless of how difficult this might be in terms of our personal wants and comfort. Notice what Paul says in Romans 13:1-2: "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."

This is a strong word given the fact that Paul was a citizen of the Roman Empire. Rome was a pagan nation that sanctioned offering sacrifices to many gods. Temple prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual immorality--including the homosexual variety--was very common. The military might, efficiency, and cruelty of the Roman army were well known and feared. Even in the face of all this, Paul says, "Submit to the governing authorities." The ability of this nation to keep order, corrupt as it is, is better than living in chaos. Christians are commanded to honor the authority of the state and to acknowledge that God has established the authorities that exist.

Furthermore, we are cautioned against rebellion. Paul says in Romans 13:3-4 "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." The fact that I don't like some rules that the state imposes upon me, or that I consider them unnecessary or unjust, does not give me license to do as I please. If I disobey and get punished, I cannot justify my actions because I am a Christian. We must take the authority of the state seriously and live according to its guidelines.

Paul's next statement is even stronger. He says in Romans 13:5 "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not

3

only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." In other words, because we know that God has given authority to civil governments to rule, to rebel against the government placed over us is the same as rebelling against God." We must obey the laws placed over us not just because we fear being punished if we disobey, but because God has told us to obey. Being good citizens of the nation we belong to is pleasing to God.

Sometimes I wish it wasn't so, but this is true even when it comes to the matter of taxes. Notice Romans 13:6-7 "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities 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.

The general rule that we live under as Christians is to be model citizens of the community, state, and nation in which we live. We are to live as model citizens so that we do not bring reproach upon the name of Christ. Our elected officials should find us trustworthy, responsible, and loyal to their leadership. They should be aware of the fact that we are praying for them and honoring their efforts. Of all citizens, Christians should be the least likely to break the laws of the land or to cheat or default on their taxes. **We are called to be good examples for other citizens.**

Now I noted that this is the general rule. But, sometimes, when the state oversteps its bounds, there will be exceptions. In Acts 4, Peter and John were arrested and jailed overnight for teaching the people that Jesus had risen from death. They were arrested by the officers of the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish court given permission by Rome to keep order among the Jews. The following day Peter and John were interrogated and eventually released with a stern warning that they were never to speak or teach in the name of Jesus again.

But Acts 4 goes on to tell us that as soon as Peter and John were set free, they returned to the Family of God in Jerusalem and told the others what had happened to them. Then they joined together in prayer that they might have the courage to disobey the court's order. They prayed for boldness to proclaim Christ and asked the Lord to continue confirming His word with healings and other signs and wonders. God responded to their prayers by refilling them with the Holy Spirit and by doing what

they asked of Him. Acts 5:12 says, "Many miracles and wonders were being performed among the people by the apostles." In Acts 5:17-18 tell us what happened next: "Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles--not just Peter and John now, but all the apostles--and put them in the public jail." But God was with the apostles and showed them His deliverance. Acts 5:19-23 say, "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin--the full assembly of the elders of Israel--and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

When the Jewish officials finally caught up with the apostles, they found them doing exactly what they commanded them not to do, so they had them brought back in and complained against them. Acts 5:27-28 say, "Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." The apostles' defense is given in verse 29: "Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

There are times when the rulers of this world make laws that directly fly in the face of the law of God, and then, regardless of the cost, we must obey God rather than men. **There are times when our citizenship in the Kingdom of God must take precedence over our citizenship in the United States of America. When the two are in conflict, we must always obey God rather than man.**

One of the most tragic pages in the history of the Christian church was written in Nazi Germany prior to and during WWII. Hitler called for the extermination of the Jews, and much of the church, citing Paul's command to obey the authorities placed over them, looked the other way. A small remnant of believers objected to what was going on and faced imprisonment and

some death, but the vast majority was silent and looked the other way. To honor Christ, we must resolve to never look the other way again. When Satan takes over the reigns of our government and commands us to commit evil or to be silent in the midst of great evil, we must stand up and speak up for God. **Regardless of the cost we must resolve to be found faithful.**

In light of all that we have said this morning, I believe there are some things we need to be doing or resolve to be doing this Memorial Day weekend. First and foremost, we need to pray for our nation and it's leaders and pray hard. Secondly, no matter how hopeless or meaningless this year's presidential election may seem, we need to pray for God's guidance and vote for the persons we believe will do the best job of leading our nation. This is no time to sit on the sidelines. Thirdly, we need to continue the fight against the things that demean and invite God's judgment on our nation: We need to continue the fight against abortion. We need to resist any redefinition of marriage that tries to say that it can be anything other than between a man and a woman. We need to keep our eyes and ears open and be ready to resist any other thing in our society that demeans or devalues human life. We need to stand up for "One nation under God," and "in God we trust."

Even Jefferson, who was a deist more than a Christian, understood how important respect for God is to the future of our nation. As noted in our pre-worship thought in the bulletin this morning, Jefferson asked the rhetorical question; i.e., a question for which the answer is obvious: "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath?" And, the obvious answer is "certainly not."

Bringing it home, Memorial Day reminds us that our nation is most precious. It has been won and preserved with the blood of many heroes. But the thing that makes our nation precious is the liberty it guarantees to its people, a liberty based on the belief that Almighty God has given everyone of us the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We must never forget that in the end there is no division between our patriotism and our allegiance to God, for whenever we are standing up for God, we are also representing the best interests of America.

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Sermon for May 25, 2008

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*Romans 13:1-7; Acts 5:25-29*

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