

Scripture

Romans 12:9 – 13:10

Marks of the True Christian

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

²⁰ No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Being Subject to Authorities

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴ for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Love for One Another

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Galatians 5:

Life by the Spirit

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Sermon: Divine Law

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

For the most part I try not to comment too much from the pulpit about what goes on south of the border. Many of the headlines and quotations are so self-evidently ridiculous that even to acknowledge them makes me feel tainted.

Proverbs 26:4 advises us to ‘not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.’ Essentially, this means that the very act of engaging a fool in debate causes us to sink to their level. Putting the time and effort into a discussion not only brings us down, but also legitimizes the fool’s claims and elevates their ideas into the realm of contention.

Anyone who has fallen into the trap of arguing with a four-year-old knows this experience. A four-year-old, like the fool, does not have enough logical acumen to follow an argument nor to propose one – simply by engaging them on their level you have already lost.

This is how I feel about much of what I read coming from the Trump administration – even to speak it aloud affords it a legitimacy that it otherwise would not have.

However, when Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoted from the book of Romans earlier this week I decided that this challenge cannot go unanswered. I feel that to stay silent on this would be a sin. There are far too many people who could easily fall prey to what Sessions said, thinking that his words are authoritative because they come from the bible.

The truth is that we live in an age of quick facts, headlines, and sound-bites – very few people take the time to learn things in context, so a few lines quoted from the bible can make many people, especially Christians, feel as though they must accept what is being said. That is because few people, including many regular church goers, are familiar with the bible, and many do not really know how to read it.

This morning we will have a look at the verses that Jeff Sessions quoted to discover whether they do in fact say what he would like them to say.

But first we need to begin with the context in which Sessions spoke.

The US recently began a program in which undocumented immigrant families are split up. When families are picked up after crossing the border, children are being taken away from their parents. For immigrant families that do not understand the language and don’t know what is going on, this is a terrifying ordeal. They don’t know where their children have been taken, or why. Nor do they know when or if they will ever see them again.

This is the result of a crackdown on undocumented immigrants coming into the US. The procedure used to be to apprehend them, and once they were identified they would be

released on their own recognisance while they waited for a hearing that would determine their status. At this court proceeding they would either be allowed to settle in and start a new life, or they would be deported, as a family, back to their country of origin.

These days there has been a dramatic increase in prosecutions for border crossers. Instead of being caught and then released to await an immigration court date, now people are being arrested by the border patrol and held in prisons or internment camps while they await trials in criminal courts, not immigration courts.

Once the parents are locked up the children can be classified as unaccompanied minors and then they are subject to indefinite detention themselves.

In Texas there is a decommissioned Walmart that currently houses more than 1500 boys between the ages of 10 and 17. Nationwide, there are over 100 facilities in 17 states housing more than 11 000 immigrant children, some of these facilities are as far away as New York. Why kids who cross the border in Texas and Arizona need to be shipped hundreds of miles away from their families is beyond my understanding.

One of the stated purposes behind this increased prosecution and separation of families is to serve as a deterrent to future immigrants. They are saying, in effect, if you come here we will put you in jail and take your children from you. So don't come.

Not only are parents and kids separated with no communication between them, but because there is no agency whose mandate is to facilitate communication between the youth lock up and the adult lock up, parents are being deported without their kids. They are thrown out of the country and are given no information about their children at all. They don't even know if their kids are alive. All this is being done to discourage immigrants from crossing the border.

This is nothing short of a terror campaign. I find that these days people are too quick to compare people they don't like to Hitler, but when we see kids in concentration camps in the heartland of the land of the free and home of the brave we need to stop and think.

The administration's defense is that they are only doing what the law prescribes, admittedly much more vigorously than previous administrations. Those crossing the border without documentation are breaking the law, and thus they are receiving just recompense for their actions.

Amidst the public outcry against this policy, the Attorney General of the United States did not try to defend the actions of the government, but instead attempted to use the bible to simply convince people to obey the government and to claim a divine sanction for his administration.

"Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution," said Sessions. "I would cite to you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes."

In a single sentence Session effectively declared that Trump has been ordained by God to lead the government, and therefore to oppose Trump or his policies is essentially to oppose God himself. Welcome to the new Caliphate of Trump.

Is what Sessions said true? Is Trump God's anointed? Are we to obey our leaders unquestioningly as agents of God's decrees?

We need to turn to the bible to find out.

Romans 13:1-2 says this: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.'

I can see why Sessions chose this passage to refer to. These two sentences declare that earthly authority is derived from God who has the ultimate authority, and that those who resist earthly authority will incur judgement as they are, in effect, resisting God.

In response, we should ask ourselves 'Is this the whole truth?' In court we are sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. A partial truth is recounting one thing while omitting something else that provides vital context. Partial truth is a form of deception.

The bible is a huge collection of letters, testimonies, poetry, wisdom sayings, and histories. Most translations are over a thousand pages. In a work this size, if I look hard enough, I can find an isolated sentence or two to support most any viewpoint I could think of. Cherry-picking verses out of context is called proof-texting and very much frowned upon by any scholar, biblical or otherwise.

Proof texting is the source of much of what fills my Facebook feed and most tabloid publications; a single photo or isolated quote with no context that leads to rabid speculation and specious conclusions. Any of you who get news and content from the internet are exposed to this all the time, you know what it is. It is partial truth, and it is generally meant to mislead and inflame.

What we want to do instead when we encounter quotes from any source is to read more than a single sentence. We need context; we need to widen our view enough to catch what the author intended.

We get this context by asking questions: who wrote the text; who were they writing to; what were they trying to communicate; what else was going on when the text was written – was it a response to a particular event; what style of writing is it – a letter, poem, historical record; and how has this text been interpreted and used in the past?

We aren't going to do all that this morning; we'll simply look at the text within its wider context and see how it has been used in the recent past. That will give us more than enough insight into whether Sessions has used it correctly.

Romans was written by the Apostle Paul to a number of believers in Rome, as the name suggests. The people Paul was writing to were a mixture of Jewish believers and former Pagans, and Paul was trying to outline some of the essentials of the faith for these folks.

The part about being subject to governing authorities is part of a much larger injunction about how Christians are expected to live. It's not just those two verses, but runs from chapters 12 to 15 of this book.

It is found bracketed by paragraphs about love that begin 'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.' Paul continues in this vein for a while and then concludes 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,' before urging his readers to follow the government of the day.

This doesn't sound like the same call to docile servitude that Sessions makes it out to be. It sounds much more like Paul is urging people to love one another, live in harmony, bless their enemies, do what is right, and follow the law. Be decent people, he is saying.

This is underscored by what follows. 'The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul dismisses any notion that he was writing of obsessive obedience to every command coming from our leaders – he summed up the law as 'love your neighbour,' echoing what Jesus said. This is also in line with what Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians. 'The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself.'

He continued in Galatians to write of the fruits of the Spirit which are 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' To this he adds '*Against such things there is no law.*'

Paul was consistent in his use of language and what he intended his readers to get from his writing – act in love and not only will you fulfil the law, but you will surpass the law – you'll have nothing to fear from the law because you won't even have to think about the law.

Paul continued for the next few chapters to expand upon what Christian living looks like: being careful not to cause others to stumble by what we say or do; don't pass judgement; seek peace; build up our neighbours; accept one another as we find each other; and rejoice in the Lord.

So we find that what Sessions was trying to say in his quotation is not really what Paul was writing about. And when we look at what Sessions omitted we will find evidence that Paul actually meant quite the opposite of what Sessions hoped.

The text that immediately follows the verses about obedience to rulers describe what rulers appointed and anointed by God look like. '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 you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good.'

In Paul's eyes, those who do no wrong have nothing to fear from their rulers. This is why acting in love always trumps the law – if you do what is right then the law cannot touch you.

But what happens when you live under a regime in which doing right or acting in love is against the law? Would Paul's words still apply?

What if the law of the land makes it a crime to flee from violence or poverty? What if the law of the land states that giving food to the homeless is a prosecutable offense, as it is in California? What if the law of the land crushes groups of people and takes away their hope and their dignity? Is that what God has ordained? Are we bound to obey these regimes without question?

Those who have used Session's scripture quotation in the past would say so. In the 19th century, defenders of slavery argued that Romans 13 mandated obedience to the Fugitive Slave Act. In the 1930s and 1940s, some European church leaders used the passage to encourage submission to Hitler. White Christians in apartheid South Africa frequently used it to defend the status quo. Those in the business of oppression like the verses that Session quoted. It keeps people firmly under control.

But those who read further find that Paul did not have oppressive regimes in mind when he wrote those lines. He was considering rulers who were not a terror to good behaviour, but only to bad. So if a ruler is a terror to those who are good, what then are our responsibilities?

Let's keep reading. 'Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.' This seems a little odd in today's climate. Is Paul really suggesting that respect and honor are not automatically due to everyone but must be earned? It certainly sounds that way to me.

These days we hear a lot about respect, and how we owe everyone respect. Paul says differently. I think that perhaps we confuse respect with dignity – we ought to treat everyone with dignity as being created children of God – but not everyone is worthy of respect. Not every action is worthy of respect.

In advising us to give what is due, Paul leaves us the option of not respecting that which is not deserving of respect. If a law is not deserving of respect, if it does not serve the public good, then we don't need to respect it. St. Augustine wrote that an unjust law is no law at all.

This is why there is such a thing as a Christian martyr. These were men and women who found death preferable to following an unjust law. They obeyed God's law of love, but defied their earthy rulers.

What we have found is that by reading a little deeper, Sessions quote actually backfires on him. He intended to cow people into blindly following authority, when in reality the larger narrative indicates that we owe obedience to those who stand on the side of good – on the side of God. We don't owe honor where no honor is due.

If Sessions had learned a little more history he would have known this. During the American Revolution, those loyal to the crown quoted what Sessions quoted. But the American Patriots kept reading and quoted 'Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil,' using this text to demonstrate that the Crown that the colony rebelled against were illegitimate rulers based on the fact that they were a terror to those who were good. And we know which side won the Revolution. Jeff hasn't done his homework – in calling for obedience using Romans 13 in the context of America he unwittingly has called for revolution against an unjust ruler.

We have seen the danger of proof-texting, quoting individual passages out of the bible without consulting their context and larger meanings. Suffice it to say that God does not condone evil done in his name.

Repeatedly in the Hebrew Testament God's people were reminded that their society would be judged not on how well they treat the rich and powerful, but how they treat the widows, orphans, and strangers among them. This message was carried by most of the prophets. 'When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong,' the author of Leviticus commands.

Jesus continued this same message in the New Testament in the parable of the sheep and the goats, where he says that our eternal judgement rests on how we have welcomed the stranger. 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

'When did we do all that?' asked his listeners.

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Knowing this, we go back out into creation, not to blindly follow the rulers of this world, but to do good; to love one another, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger.

Give to everyone what you owe them; Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.