

“Romans 13: No, no, no! Paul Did NOT say that!”

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Scripture:

Romans 12:9 to 13:10

Romans 12:9 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. Romans 13 :1 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. 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.

Sermon:

Over the past couple of weeks, I've learned a couple things about our current Attorney General of the United States, Jeff Sessions that I had not known before!

First, I had no idea that he was a Methodist. And I only now know this because a bunch of them are trying to get him kicked out of the denomination!

And while I already knew that he had a questionable understanding of our nation's laws and lacked basic respect for civil rights and empathy for immigrants and folks of color, I didn't know just how downright ignorant he was of the Bible or just how thoroughly depraved his attitudes are towards brown skinned immigrants, and to what depths of meanness he and our president were capable of.

Of course, what is most diabolical here is not ignorance of scripture or disrespect for the laws of our nation, but it is the unholy and immoral actions by our government to terrorize families along our southern border.

We may argue that the decisions made by the powerful in Washington are ignorant, stupid, "politically imprudent," racially biased, and poorly thought out or executed only to rile up their base."

But we cannot forget that real people, real men, women and children are being made to suffer the consequences.

And that my sisters and brothers is sin! It is evil!

Whew, now that I got that off my chest, Let's talk a bit about a pet peeve I have regarding misusing scripture.

I love the Bible. I always have.

From my earliest days in Sunday school, through High School youth group and on into college where I attended and even led lots of Bible studies, the interest and desire to read and better understand the Bible has always been strong.

This love of scripture eventually led me to seminary and finally to becoming a pastor.

I have always tried to guide my everyday life by how I understood the scriptures.

I want to take it seriously, which to me includes study, holding it up to scrutiny, using modern scholarship and then allowing its clearest messages to affect my choices.

I know I get up here week after week and expound on the scriptures and I know that I make it look easy. But it ain't folks. It's actually hard work sometimes.

And though I know this sounds a bit arrogant, and Christians aren't supposed to be arrogant, I am a professional!

Not only did I spend three years in seminary, I do this kind of stuff for a living, and though you might not all agree with everything I say all the time, you do pay me to do it!

But Biblical exegesis, a fancy Greek word I learned in seminary, means to "uncover" or "to lead out." It is more than just book learning, but includes testing and reflecting upon the stuff of real life, those experiences that stretch and mold us into who we are.

And again, forgive my pride, but I have five decades or more of some pretty varied and significant life experiences. So I do literally cringe sometimes when I hear someone misuse or misinterpret what the Bible is actually saying. I will also not idly stand aside when someone, like Jeff Sessions, misuses the Bible to promote evil actions.

Now I doubt most of you are struggling with Mr. Sessions' interpretation. After all, he is certainly not the first to misuse scripture in the demented pursuit of clearly ungodly behavior. And of course, he will not be the last to use that now infamous passage in Roman's 13 to justify such grave injustices.

Slave owners used the same passage to justify slavery and to threaten anyone else who tried to help end slavery. Nazi Germany also used the same passage for both its genocidal laws as well as to imprison and murder those who without fear, "refused to obey the law."

Overtly Christian governments, both Catholic and Protestant, hunted down, arrested, persecuted, tortured and burned at the stake our early Anabaptist fore parents precisely because they were breaking laws of "Godly ordained authorities!" So, I guess it should not come as a surprise that I was raised with a slightly different understanding of Romans 13.

Of course, the problem for Mr. Sessions, and most others, is that he removes verses 1-7 of chapter 13 out of any and all contexts. This is the reason I started the reading at chapter 12:9 and stopped at verse 13:10.

Verses 13:1-7 are a part of a larger literary context, and when considered within that larger context, the idea of blind obedience to any and all governing authorities becomes far more complicated.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good..."

Maybe in the list of Empires the Roman Empire wasn't the worst? But we still know that it perpetuated plenty of evil. Paul knew this and had first-hand experience as he had been a part of those who collaborated with Rome in Jerusalem.

Paul was a Roman citizen, but he was also Jewish and as he traveled first century Palestine he would have seen the many towns still lying in rubble as witnesses to what happens to those who dare resist Roman rule.

So what is going on here? Is he merely schizophrenic?
In Paul's "theme" statement we are told to "hate evil"
but later to obey even an evil government?

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.

But Romans 13 is not the only place in the New Testament that talks about the role of governing authorities.

According to John Howard Yoder, an eminent Mennonite theologian, who like me, was raised with some real concerns about the more common interpretations of Roman's 13, explains that the Gospels in general seem to understand that secular governments are in the control of Satan. This was most clearly expressed, Yoder believes, in the temptation story, where Jesus did not challenge Satan's claim that he, Satan, has the power to deliver every nation to Jesus' control. Another chapter 13, this time in Revelations, Yoder points out, we have a similar image of a government in the control of satanic powers that was viciously persecuting the church. Yoder also sees evidence in the epistles of Peter and James that also assumes the state is the province of Satan .

Yoder also makes a major point to highlight Paul's choice of words. He feels it is critical to note that the current government was "instituted" but not "ordained" by God. Paul is merely stating what is. And that God ultimately allows and has power over any human authority!

And we have seen throughout Jewish history that God can even use very "evil" empires to complete his ultimate purposes as well as bringing down even "ordained" governments like the Kings of Israel and Judah who fail to obey or remain subordinate to God.

"God will sort it all out in the end," Paul is saying.
But in the mean time hold on to love and do what is good.
Not being over come with evil is certainly not passive,
but I would submit an act of resistance.
But Paul is very concerned with the type of resistance.
And in making his case he refers back to Jesus.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said,
"Pray for those who persecute you."
Paul now states it in 12:14,
"Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse."

And where Jesus commands us in Matthew's version,
"Do not resist an evil doer."

Paul encourages us,

"Do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good."

But of course, there is more here than what
a simple English translation can completely uncover.

Matthew and Paul use the same Greek verb for "resist,"
which can be translated as "stand against violently."
But Paul also uses another Greek verb for "to resist"
that means to stand up to or against a specific military formation.

Using Biblical scholars, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borgs
exegetical assistance, verses 2 and 5 could be read:

"Whoever violently resists, authority will resist with military formations, what God has appointed, and those who stand against using military formations will incur judgment... One must be subject to violent resistance/reprisals not only because of wrath but also because of conscience."

Add to this the fact that both Matthew and Luke's versions
are identical in Jesus' command to, "Love your enemies",
and that Paul mentions love five times in the last three verses,
Borg and Crossan conclude that,

"Paul is most afraid, not that Christians will be killed but that they will kill, not that Rome will use violence against Christians but that Christians will use violence against Rome. And that emphasizes the ultimate difference between the peace of Rome (Pax Romana) and the peace of Christ (Pax Christi)."

Now most of the time I just wish that Paul would have left this part out,
But I guess you could say that it ain't his fault that translators
got it so wrong and folks like Jeff still get it soooo wrong!
It makes our job tougher, but you know what they say;
"When the going gets tough, the tough get going!"
But the other really sad thing about the inclusion of 1-7 is that it
distracts us from so such powerful stuff in the larger passage:

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good... be ardent in spirit... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ...extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... live peaceably with all. ...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

So I leave you this morning with this parting question,
and that question is not whether we must resist our government?
The question is how will YOU resist the current evil
that is perpetuated by our current governing authorities?
Or, in other words, what, short of violence,
will you be willing to engage in?

Will it be speaking up? Will it be standing out
on a street corner with a sign or marching in protest?
For some it may mean risking arrest, or even risking our lives?

But I have also learned the past few weeks
that resistance can take so many forms.
And we have witnessed that it can be effective when enough folks
step up and do many seemingly small things.

A couple in California set up an Internet funding site
hoping to raise at least \$1500 for legal services for detainees.
By Wednesday night they had raised over \$15 million
and by Friday it was over \$17 million!

A flight attendant who worked a flight that was moving
some of these children to other states
(and as of Friday children have been moved to over 16 states)
and who was haunted by those faces, decided to write
a powerful OpEd piece that was printed in the Huston newspaper,
stating that he will refuse to work on any future flights.
Most major airlines have also stated publicly that they will no longer transport of children separated
from their families.

People all over the nation are reporting
the transport of these children to the media!
The total number of children separated is unknown
but believe to be around 2500.

There is also a genuine fear that our government will not be able
to keep track of them all and that some families will not be reunited.

Maybe some children will end up here in Ft Collins?
Merely keeping our eyes and ears open, as we go about our daily lives, or as we travel is now a form of
nonviolent resistance.
Maybe we will need open our homes to some of these children?
Maybe we will need to open our homes and wallets to
Border Patrol agents, or Homeland Security and Health and Human Service employees who will become
conscientious objectors and face reprisals?

Yes, there are lots of ways to resist ... about as many ways as there are people in this room.
And together that is how, that is the only way
we will be able to over come evil with good!

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