

Sermon 175: Romans 13:1: God's sovereignty over bad government

OUTLINE

The bible's teaching of God's sovereignty over bad governments
The mechanism of how God is sovereign over bad governments
The relevance of God's sovereignty over bad government

INTRODUCTION

Christians can and should submit to bad governments. They are not submitting to the devil but God. How is this possible, because God has given the authority relationship of government to man, and He has sovereignly put even the bad governments in place. This is the gist of what we have been saying Paul is impressing upon the Romans in our section so far. Submission to the Roman Government was a point of contention and they needed some motivation to submit. Paul's motivation is that government authority is a common grace gift of God to fallen man, and now in this message we will be exploring the idea that Christians can and should submit to bad governments, because God has sovereignly appointed bad governments.

Now you and I live in a day of political liberation where we have seen the removal of monarchs, the casting off of the oppression of colonialism, we sit in a privileged position where we are reaping the benefits of hundreds of years of Christian influence in the west. We assume democracy, intervention through the UN and other peace keeping forces to overthrow tyrants and are deeply sympathetic to bloody revolution as we have seen in the Arab Spring where several countries in the Middle-East sought to throw off political oppression. The Arab Spring is a term used to describe the political unrest in North Africa and the Middle East, that began in 2010 and whose ramifications are still being felt today. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and other Arab countries saw various forms of political uprising for more liberal democratic freedoms. Authoritarianism, human rights violations, the great recession, political corruption and other matters were evils that could not be tolerated. Now when you and I hear the words of Paul, 'and those that exist have been instituted by God,' we have great difficulty in agreeing with Paul that this is, or is even a good thing. So today I want us to think deeply and biblically with Paul about the truth statement that he has made, that bad governments are put in authority by God.

Can you feel your knee jerk reaction kicking out? Can you feel all the assumptions of our modern age rising to reject such a statement? But this statement is as true today as it was for Paul. We however are no longer in a suitable position to appreciate what Paul is saying and how he means it. My job today is to defend biblically what is a most repugnant statement to the modern man. This is the sort of statement that because we are so distant and so politically attuned to liberal democracy, this shuts down all conversation because we cannot conceive of any way for it to be true. God is sovereign over bad governments, we will look firstly at the biblical teaching of this fact, secondly, we want to explore some of the mechanisms about how a good God can institute bad governments and still be good, and then finally we want to reflect on the relevance of such a teaching.

The bible's teaching of God's sovereignty over bad governments

Given our modern sensibilities, the idea that God's sovereignty is so encompassing that it includes being sovereign over bad governments is the sort of thing that some Christians

want to automatically deny. But remember we are transformed into living sacrifices through renewing our minds, not getting God to agree with our modern sensibilities. So let me begin with the clear teaching that God indeed establishes bad governments.

The nearest example we have is Rom. 9:17, 'For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" You will remember Pharaoh and the bad ruler that he was. He was the ruler in Egypt, the one Moses confronted and who held Israel in bondage. Here was a ruler who declared himself a god, he was an oppressor of God's people, and when he was confronted with God's word and miracles he was so stubborn that he brought terrible agony on his own people. He was a man who did bad things, and we are clearly told that God raised him up. At first it may sound like God is empowering the oppression; that He is indifferent to the case of the oppressed. And it may appear to be a statement typical of an ancient document reflecting ancient views about gods who are indifferent to basic human rights; a statement that seems to believe that might makes right and what we would expect from primitive cultures. There is much that we want to say to negate this impression, but the first thing we want to point out is that the text itself does tell us God's motivation. 'That I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' God raised up Pharaoh to reveal His glory and power. God had purposes of salvation, of justice, of mercy and of holiness. The raising up of Pharaoh was not the end of God's intentions but the means to the end of revealing His glory and fulfilling His purposes.

Now you might ask, well is God just a pragmatist, does He force evil on a nation to accomplish these ends. This is an objection we will take up in our next point. Let us first establish the point that God does indeed set up these governments.

Another famous OT example is the example of Nebuchadnezzar. Israel were exiled into Babylon because of their disobedience, the book of Daniel is written during this 70 year period. Nebuchadnezzar the ruler has several dreams which Daniel interpreted, and in particular he had a dream which also resulted in him being declared insane for a seven year period. The point of the dream and the humbling experience of losing his mind was to impress upon him a very important truth. Daniel 4:31-32, 'While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, 32 and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.'" Nebuchadnezzar had been proud and credited the success and richness of his reign to himself. Like Pharaoh he was the most powerful man on earth at the time, and he was being taught that it is God who establishes the various governments of the earth.

Another famous example is in the gospels in John 19 where Jesus is having His mock trial before Pilate. The crowd were crying out for his crucifixion but Pilate sought to make him free, John 19:10-11, 'So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.'" Here is Pilate thinking that he has an authority that is supreme, but He is reminded by Christ that it is an authority that it lent to Him from God. This is the universal teaching of the bible.

There is one glaring application that we must make right here and now, and this was impressed on all those in the verses we have just quoted. God gives power, and God holds

those in power accountable. The Church has no jurisdiction to command the state, however, because the same law that is written on all of our hearts to obey is the law written in the word, there are clear and knowable standards that public officials will be held to by God. Something is not right simply because the majority of the people say so, or the government says so, rulers and authorities are held accountable by God.

So we have established that fact that God ordains bad governments, and we should say a little about why. Why would a good God allow such a situation? Here are a few reasons which will begin an answer, but it should be stated that this question like all questions that query God's motives cannot be given an exhaustive answer.

Firstly, the notion that a good God must only install perfect governments must be rejected. We have already shown that after the fall, government continues as an institution to regulate human society as a common grace gift not as a means of bringing in the kingdom. Therefore it need not be a perfect representation of the government of the new creation. Secondly, we must say that every government after the fall is a bad government. From our twenty first century perspective we view as philistines those earlier forms of government that did not give women the vote, or have freedom of speech. But let us also realise that they in turn would criticise us for murdering our unborn children, and our elderly. The next generation will look back on this one and shame us for our terrible political crimes, and here we are thinking we are doing so very well.

Thirdly, God does at times allow the rulers to go bad because He is seeking to bring about His judgements upon a people. This happens so that when they fall it is demonstrable that they were deserving of punishment. Now this is a purpose in keeping with God's purposes of judging and saving which the unbelieving mind sees as separate from the purposes of government. But here is a point of difference in perspective which makes appointing bad governments less troublesome for the Christian.

Fourthly, the reality of bad government is not an indication of a weak God or an unloving God but the reality of a devil who is still influencing the affairs of men, and men who still have hearts driven by sin. It reminds us of the time we are in, and the time when Christ will come to correct all these problems.

Fifthly, God can draw straight lines with crooked sticks. Because God does not force the sinner against his nature to do things he is unwilling to do, and because God is so wise and powerful to be able to overrule and cause all His good purposes to prosper without violating the will of the creature. Bad governments can exist without frustrating God's overall purposes. They serve then the double purpose of communicating the sinfulness of sin, the destruction of sin, the folly of sin, as well as the grace of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, etc. they are a double edged sword that channels God's common grace to us through maintaining order and law, but also its many failures impress the reality of our fallen condition and need for salvation upon us.

Sixthly, we need to remember that God's plan for this time between the fall and Christ coming again is not to rebuild Eden now but to save a people. Therefore we should remember that we live in a time where evil is not being punished, sinners are allowed to continue to live and are not immediately judged because God is saving a people. this means that there will constant institutionalised evil. And since the bible teaches that there is a devil who influences men to attack and try to wipe out the church, Christians will always be persecuted by governments in one way or another. Bad governments are reminders of God's grace, that He is not judging, but one day will.

I am deeply sympathetic to the desire to have good government. I believe we have all been made by God to be ruled by Him. We know when things are bad because we have been made to be ruled by the perfect God. Our deep sense of injustice is not a reason for us to get angry at God because He is not making governments better now as we think He should.

Rather your frustration with imperfect governments should be a reason for you to turn to God. Things are wrong and broken, and He is allowing it to be so for now, because if He judged it would not be all the bad people who you thought deserved it, it would be you as well. And so He is patient and makes a way of salvation. Christ has come to not only save rebels who have turned against God's government, but He has taken His throne and will one day set up a kingdom where all political evils will be overturned. One day we will have a president who we will be worshipping not slandering in the media and calling crazy. Don't let your desire for justice turn you from God, let it drive you to the only one who can pay for your injustices and will make a world where all injustices will be removed.

The mechanism of how God is sovereign over bad governments

So far we have established that God puts bad governments in power, and that there are practical reasons for Him doing so. The next question that arises is: how can God not be the author of sin if he is putting these governments in power? The question of personal freedom usually raises its head whenever the bible makes any assertions about God's sovereignty. One of the difficulty lies in the way we would express a thing, after having centuries of philosophical interaction, theological reflection, and uniform expressions brought about through education, and the way the ancient mind would express it. The ideas of first and second causes are not original to Christianity but borrowed from Aristotle. A first cause we would ordinarily associate with unmediated and direct activity, and second causes are those things that are mediated and indirect. The bible when discussing God's activity in the world does not use the categories we have been trained to use. The bible speaks about God bringing His will to pass but is not always as concerned as we are to make sure, as if we were in a court room to credit who is the first cause and who is the second.

So as we discuss God being sovereign over bad governments we are talking about God's sovereignty and providential ruling over evil. The same principles would apply. When we explain how God is sovereign even over the sinful acts of men we have some very important categories we need to use. We have summed this up before as God's passive judicial hardening of sinners as the mechanism whereby God is sovereign over the sinful acts of men, including government. Let me simply explain it and then demonstrate it from the bible. Let us say that God wants to make David king. However, Saul is king. Saul does not deserve to be king and has sinned against God bringing God's judgement upon himself. Now it is not a case of God putting a thought into Saul's mind to kill himself. This would be a direct and unmediated act. Instead God's actions of judgement are passive. This means that it is not a case of God being hands on but hands off. He leaves Saul to sin of his own heart. God removes the regular restraints of conscience and systems of checks and balances that would inhibit his actions. Saul is left to his own devices. So the action of sinning is his, the source of the temptation is from his own heart and not God. Saul is fully doing all his own will, but he is also fulfilling God's will which is to bring judgement upon Saul and make David king. When we hear it explained this way we say, 'Ah yes, that makes sense.' However, as we come to the scriptures it was not written at a time when everyone needed actions slotted into categories of first and second causes. It was not written at a time when people were against God and constantly criticising Him and on the back foot trying to defend themselves against atheism. And so the bible makes strong claims that seem to jar with the way we would explain a thing. 1 Chron. 10:4, 'Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and mistreat me." But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it.'

V13-14, 'So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. 14 He did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.' Notice the way it is expressed in verse 14, 'the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David.' When we apply legal and philosophical categories to such a phrase it makes it sound as if God is the one who killed Saul by stabbing him with a sword, instead of Saul killing himself. The concern of the text is not to anticipate and answer every philosophical objection but to give us the bottom line that God is sovereign and that His will came to pass. He is in charge of who becomes king. He is sovereign and makes His will come to pass but not by violating the will of the creature and nor is He the source or the author of any sins committed. The sins, and in this case the bad actions of bad governments, are freely committed by the men who rule not God. Yet we must still say that God is sovereign even over evil and bad governments.

The relevance of God's sovereignty over bad government

Why do you need to know that God places all governments in power, why did the Romans need to know it? In the first place they needed to know it so that they could chart a course through all the anti-government sentiment around them. But most importantly, all Christians need a reminder of the sovereignty of God. When living in the most powerful city in the world, as part of the most powerful empire of the world, it is good to know that God is bigger than they are. When the pressure to bow to Caesar comes, when the pressure to recognise what Rome had accomplished as an apologetic to accept its philosophies and religions, it is good to know that they would have nothing apart from what God had given to them. When the persecution begins and Christians are being martyred, it is not because God is not powerful and ruling, but it is because He has mysteriously purposed this as the wiser and better way to accomplish His purposes and we can trust in His good will coming to pass. Man may be intending it for evil but God is in charge and causing it to come to pass for the good of His church.

The book of Revelation reveals the spiritual war of which we are a part and the fact that the beast is given authority to wage war against the saints. But the nature of the battle is such that in death we conquer and the external triumph of political power is not a sign of who is really winning the war of the ages. Remember the centre of history is God's plan for the church and the rise and fall of kingdoms is merely the stage and background for God's central work. And no matter what stage we are on God's purposes will flourish. This reality sets us free from anxiety. It sets us free from getting distracted from the gospel and trying to bring in the kingdom by political activism.

If the government is an area that is under God's control then prayer is not merely a way of complaining, but we can be heard on matters related to the government. Because God is in charge when the bible tells us to pray for our government, to pray for peace, to pray for open doors for the gospel, to pray for prosperous countries that the church can fund missions, we can expect an answer and commit ourselves to the act of praying.

If God has given us the gift of authority in the form of government then we have an opportunity to put on display what a God honouring citizenship looks like. This becomes a legitimate area of service and witness.

But like in all instances of discussing God's sovereignty we resist false notions of fatalism that put away all our responsibilities. We do not ignore or condone the evil done by the government but continue a prophetic witness to them.