Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

It seems like a very appropriate time for us to be thinking about the civil government and our attitude toward it. With one recent announcement, our government has shut down the NZ economy and we have all been told to stay home.

And right in the middle of it all, our government hurried through legislation making abortions much easier to access, right up to full term.

And if you want to get a good debate going around the dinner table, just mention topics like capital punishment, taxation, social welfare, carbon credits, or defense spending, and just watch it go off – whoosh!

But the simple fact is that pretty much every part of daily life is influenced by national or local govt: There are laws to obey, taxes to pay, forms to fill out, votes to make, regulations to adhere to, fines to pay, and authorities to honour. And some people question whether citizens of Christ’s kingdom are bound by the laws of earthly governments? And, if so, to what degree?

Well, the best place in the Bible for us to turn to in relation to these issues is our text. In fact, apart from relevant Bible stories and the odd verse here or there, this is the only passage of the Bible that speaks in detail about God and the civil government and the believer’s attitude and obligations toward civil government.

And before we go any further, it is relevant to think about why Paul chose to speak about this topic here in this letter. Ch. 12 begins the Christian living part of the letter. And Christian living is described in vv3-16 as love for those *inside* the church and in vv17-21 as love for those *outside* the church, and especially our enemies. And if you look ahead to the verse after our text, v8, it says, “*Owe nothing to anyone except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law*.”

So, remembering that Paul was writing to **believers in Rome**, which was the capitol of the Empire and that persecution of Christians, by the governing authorities, had begun, it makes perfect sense for Paul to speak about civil government and believer’s attitude towards it, as a concrete application of what Christian love looks like.

And one other point that is very relevant to this passage is that the submission to governing authorities that Paul commands here is the very same submission demonstrated by the Lord Jesus. So Christian living, unsurprisingly, looks like the life that Christ lived. And that is why we will speak about submission to governing authorities as Christian submission.

So, our passage here is about **the Christian’s proper submission to civil government**. And we will think about this under these three headings: The **reason** for our submission, the **nature** of our submission, and the **method** of our submission.

1. So first of all, the **reason** for the Christian’s proper submission to civil government.
   1. And we find this plainly stated in vv1-2 where we are told that every government and governor has been instituted or raised up or put in place by God. So we have a Labour led coalition government, ultimately, not because of how we voted but because that is the government that God has established in NZ.
      1. Do you boys and girls remember the three OMNI words that we use to describe God? He is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Omni means all. So omnipresent means God is present, everywhere. Omniscient means all-knowing – God knows everything. And omnipotent means all powerful – God can do everything and He is in control of everything.
         1. **Psalm 115:3** says, “*Our God is in heaven; He does all that He pleases.*”
         2. And **Romans 8:28** tells us a part of what pleases God: “*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God*.” So God’s omnipotence, God’s sovereignty causes all things to work together for the good of those who love Him. And all things includes every government and every governing authority; they are all established and overseen by God.
      2. Can you B&G think of someone in the OT who worked in the government? Clue – The man I am thinking of was eventually put into a lion’s den. **Daniel**. Well, at one time, Daniel prayed this prayer, “*Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are His. He changes times and seasons; He sets up kings and deposes them.*” And deposes means to remove. So every king/queen or prime-minister or Judge is put in their position by God and will leave their position on the day that God has pre-determined. And this is true whether they be good and righteous governors or nasty tyrants.
         1. Do you boys and girls remember the story of **Pharaoh** and the people of Israel in Egypt? Pharaoh was very nasty to the people of Israel. He made them slaves and they had to build his buildings and work in the field, and He ordered that they be beaten and whipped. And next he gave an order that all of the boy babies of the Israelites be killed after birth. And the Israelites were initially provided with straw and with that straw they had to make a certain amount of bricks each day. But when Moses asked Pharaoh if the people could leave Egypt, Pharaoh decreed that the people would have to collect their own straw and still make the same amount of bricks each day. But through Moses, God said to Pharaoh, “*I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth*.” So even though Pharaoh was a cruel tyrant and God’s people suffered great hardship, Pharaoh was put in his position by to accomplish the purpose of God. And we know the story of the ten plagues and how eventually Pharaoh sent the people away and was destroyed in the Red Sea.
         2. Another example is **Nebuchadnezzar,** who was the ruler of Babylon when Daniel prayed his prayer. And Nebuchadnezzar ruled a world empire but eventually lost his mind and lived in a field like an animal, in order to learn that he, Nebuchadnezzar, mighty as he was, was not in charge. God is the ultimate ruler; God is the omnipotent one; God is the All-mighty.
         3. And it was the same with the Roman **Caesars**, including Nero, who was so cruel to Christians. And it was so also with **Hitler** and Stalin and Pol Pot.
      3. And what all this means is that Queen Elizabeth, PM Jacinda Ardern, Mayor Phil Goff, the policeman who pulls you over for speeding, Naomi Ferguson, who is the one who signs the letters you receive from the Inland Revenue Department, and Dr Ashley Bloomfield, who is leading NZ’s response to Covid-19; all these were raised up to their positions by God.
      4. So the reason why you must be subject to their authority is because all authority has its origins in our sovereign God.
   2. Now, before we move on to our second point, there may be some of you already wondering **how far this call to submission goes?** Must I obey every rule and every guideline, always? Do I have to show respect to *every* governing authority, *all* of the time? And we will have more to say about this matter in a moment, but I want to begin our answer to this question by reminding you that when it comes to the commands of God, we must let the *plain* thing be the *main* thing.
      1. It is in our sinful nature that when we are presented with a command of God, we immediately start asking questions about the exceptions to the rule and what situations do not apply, etc. And while there is a place for those debates and discussions, we must let the plain thing be the main thing! So before we start looking for exceptions to the rule, let’s first work on an attitude of submission and obedience. If we are followers of Christ, whose whole life was characterized by submission to His Father’s will and to all authority, including that of sinful parents, and Pharisees, and Pontius Pilate, and the soldiers who whipped Him and spat on Him, we must pray for a submissive heart. We must cultivate an attitude that starts with obedience before it considers exceptions.
2. And we see more of this as we continue, secondly, to vv3-5 and the **nature** of our submission. For here we are told that God has established governing authorities for the regulation and punishment of those who do wrong in human society.
   1. A common view of humanity today is that people are basically good. It is the philosophy known as **humanism**. It is why, for example, our government requires everyone arriving in NZ at the moment to self-isolate for 14 days, and then is horrified to see a group of tourists who arrive in NZ taking a group selfie on a glacier that very afternoon. And this is because of this starting assumption that people are basically good. But the Bible speaks very plainly about the natural condition of humanity, and it is not good; it is evil!
      1. In **Genesis 6**, just prior to Noah’s flood, we read that “*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*.”
      2. And you say, oh, that’s ancient, uncivilized humanity. So you would expect, then, that God’s covenant people would be really good, then! But have you read the Book of **Judges**? Incest, murder, rape, genocide, homosexuality, idolatry, injustice, and a woman’s body cut up into 12 pieces, are just some of the stories in Judges. And as a summary of those days, the last verse of the Book says, “*In those days there was no king in Israel. And everyone did what was right in his own eyes*.” It was a time of total lawlessness.
      3. But here we are in 2020! And you say, We are educated and enlightened! So have we abolished crime? No. Are we less greedy? No. Is domestic violence trending down? No. Has child abuse disappeared? No. Are more marriages enduring till death do us part? No. Do we need fewer fraud investigations? No. Are mental health hospitals closing? No. Are there fewer prisons? No. Why? Because the wickedness of man is still great in the earth, and every intention of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually.” As our confession article puts it: “because of the depravity of mankind, God ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.”
   2. And so, **v4** says, “*Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad … [The ruler] is God’s servant for good … If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer*.” What every society has in common is that its citizens are human beings with sinful hearts. And so, to restrain evil (which means to limit it or hold it back as much as possible) and for the punishment of evildoers, God has established the realm of civil government with laws and police and judiciaries.
      1. Back in **ch. 12:17**, we read these words: “*Repay no one evil for evil … do what is honourable … live peaceably with everyone … never avenge yourselves … do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*.” When people are allowed to pursue personal revenge for crime, you get feuds and cartels and tit for tat killings and wrongful deaths, that just spirals down into chaos. And even though a system of law and police won’t always get everything right, it has checks and balances in it that promotes peace and tranquility way more than the system of personal revenge does. And so, government and a robust law and order system is a gift of God.
   3. And all this means that our responsibility, as a follower of Christ, from v3, is “*to do what is good,*” to live peaceably, and to pray for and support those who “*bear the sword*” as servants of God. And this has **taxation implications**, doesn’t it. We will have to pay taxes because it costs money to run a government, and to have an effective law and order system to deal with citizens who commit crime, and a defense force to deal with foreign invaders who commit crime.
   4. Well, before we move on to think about our responsibilities a bit more, here is a good place for us to see that there some God-ordained **limits** on the submission we owe to governing authorities.
      1. We see an illustration of this in the story of Daniel’s three friends – **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego**.
         1. And let’s start with their *obedience* to the laws of the king. I just said that Daniel’s three friends were S, M, and A. But those names were not their given names. Their given names; their Hebrew names, were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. But in order to serve in the court of the king, they were given Babylonian names. Would you like to have your name taken away and just be given a new one that someone else decided? I wouldn’t! But this was a law that they could submit to because it did not violate a command of God.
            1. And so, as an example of something similar, our government has said do not hold church services. And we are obeying that law for a time because it is not a ban on Christianity but something we are being asked to do out of love for our neighbours.
         2. But S, M, and A didn’t obey every law of the king. I am sure you boys and girls will remember that they were commanded by the king to bow down to a statue of the king in worship. Did they obey that law? No. Why? Because God says we must worship Him alone.
            1. And so, as an example of something similar, Christians in China are forbidden from gathering for worship because the government hates Christ. But they still gather for worship because God commands His people to gather for worship.
         3. We see another example of civil disobedience with **Peter and John** in Acts. They were forbidden from preaching about Jesus by the Jewish authorities and threatened with imprisonment and beating. But they replied, “*We must obey God rather than men*” and went right on preaching.
         4. And so, as our confession article puts it, “We must obey [the civil authorities] in all things, which do not disagree with the Word of God.” So when the governing authorities require us to do something that God forbids or forbid us from doing something that God commands, we must disobey. But what we strive for, what we do if it is at all possible, and willingly, is to submit to the governing authorities.
         5. And when this is our attitude, as we have noted a few times already, we are honouring Christ and imitating Him, which is the Christian life that we are called to live.
3. So our third and last point is where we see what subjection to the governing authorities looks like from day to day, as we consider the **method** of our submission from vv6-7. We pay taxes, we pay revenue, and we show respect and honour to whom it us due.
   1. And I want us to think about a few specifics but before that let’s think a little more about the Lord Jesus.
      1. In Matthew 17 we read about a time when the Jewish authorities questioned Jesus disciples about whether or not Jesus paid the temple tax. Now think about that for a moment. Jesus is the Lord and King of creation. He is the promised Messiah who the whole temple pointed to! And yet He paid the tax.
      2. And in Matthew 22 we have His well-known words about tax – "*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*."
      3. Think about Him submitting to arrest by the soldiers. Think about Him being whipped and spat upon by the soldiers. Think about Him submitting to Pilate’s questions, when, as Jesus said, He could have summoned legions of angels to deliver Him.
      4. And all of this was a part of how He secured the forgiveness of your sins. His subjection to governing authorities was how He perfectly obeyed the 5th Commandment, which requires honouring of authority, so that all of our disobedience to the 5th Commandment could be covered over.

* 1. And that is why, congregation, we obey the civil authorities:
     1. When they require us to separate our rubbish and put some things in the red bin and some in the yellow, we do it.
     2. And we drive in the left lane unless we are overtaking.
     3. And in the box where it asks if you have declared all your income, we include the cash jobs.
     4. And we don’t call the police ‘the pigs?’
     5. And we don’t turn magazines in the supermarket or service station with the Prime-ministers face on them around.
     6. And we do jury duty if at all possible.
     7. And we vote.
     8. And at the moment, we don’t drive to different beaches for a walk or a surf.
  2. And we pray, regularly, for governing authorities. But we also cry out to the Lord to take note of the abortion and euthanasia legislation that our politicians have passed. And we pray that the Lord would remove evil tyrants and persecutors from positions of power. But most of all, we pray that Jesus would come back to earth soon and establish the purity and perfection of His eternal kingdom.

May the Lord make us useful citizens of NZ because we serve King Jesus. Amen.