

A Response to Attorney General Jeff Sessions

06/24/2018

To the Saints of God at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Hampton, VA:

This past week the Attorney General for the United States of America, Jeff Sessions, quoted scripture in a press conference. In a press conference on immigration he defended his actions with the following:

*"I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order," he said. "Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and lawful."*¹

Now, if you are not familiar with Romans 13 let me help you out:

"1Let 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. 3For 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; 4for 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. 5Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 6For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. 7Pay to all what is due them — taxes to whom taxes are due,

¹<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2018/06/14/sessions-cites-bible-to-defend-separating-immigrant-families.html>

revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."²

But the chapter doesn't stop there, if you read a few more sentences you get the following:

*"8Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The 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." 10Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. 11Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."*³

The two paint a much different picture when looked at together. In fact, one of the first things you learn in any biblical studies class is that you cannot cherry-pick scripture without looking at the context of the verse within the larger picture of the chapter, the book, and the Bible as a whole. When we do this we end up being able to justify all manner of strange things. Just take the book of Leviticus, it is completely FULL of rules and laws that we no longer follow. All of this is to say that we cannot simply take Romans 13 at face value. What have others said about the text? How does this text fit into the larger story of God's work in the world?

² Romans 13:1-7 NRSV

³ Romans 13:8-14 NRSV

Unfortunately, this section of scripture does not have a proud history. It has been used most famously by governments at two different times. The first was by those who advocated for slavery in the United States.⁴ The second, and most damning for us Lutherans, was by Nazi Germany to argue for why the population should just go along with whatever they deemed necessary.⁵ That's right, when people felt that it was OK to hold other human beings as slaves and when a country participated in the execution of roughly 6 million Jews, they used this passage to convince the country to fall in line.

Now I had a long theological argument for why we should be uncomfortable when a government leader starts to say things like this and another long argument for how to understand the 13th chapter of Romans, but I think it would be best to have those conversations in person. Instead, I invite you to prayerfully consider our current immigration crisis. The ELCA has joined other national religious bodies in condemning our country's behavior. If you think this is just the opinion of a few "liberal" church leaders then please take a look at the bookmark that was placed in your bulletin. In it you will find 40 passages regarding how God thinks we should treat aliens. Take it home and take the 40 day challenge. Read the passage and pray every day for 40 days in a row, and then come talk to me about how you feel. Maybe it changes your mind, maybe it doesn't, but it's a conversation we NEED to have.

Grace and Peace,

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

⁴Blount, Brian K., et al. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. pp. 269-270

⁵Achtemeier, Paul J. *Romans: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. pp, 203