

God's People Bless America

Romans 13:1-7

July 4, 2010

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Honoring our Nation's Heritage:

Today we will draw upon two sources of written authority; first from the scriptures, and then from the Declaration of Independence. The first paragraph is copied on page 5 of the bulletin.

In this service dedicated to the worship of Almighty God, we recognize His Provident Hand in creating and sustaining our nation. The Lord reigns over all nations and seeks justice for all people. We remember with gratitude the events of 234 years ago, when a Declaration of Independence proclaimed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

As Christ followers we reserve worship for God alone. To give ultimate allegiance to any nation would make a good gift into an idol; it would turn a blessing into a curse. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. (13:1). Human constructs exist to serve God's purposes.

In a few minutes we'll probe deeper into the responsibilities of Christian citizenships. But first, as part of our worship of God, we'll honor our nation's heritage. For in Romans the apostle also wrote,

Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (13:7)

Let's honor our nation through song, and be grateful for those whom God has used to sustain a nation that provides "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

[After music and Pray for the Nation]

In Paul's teaching to the church in Romans 13:

¹Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For 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 he will commend you. ⁴For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. ⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

It's always surprising to hear Paul's emphasis on submitting to the governing authorities. The Roman Emperor worshipped idols, was flagrantly immoral and brutal. Caesar's appointed governors often administered Roman justice unfairly; as when Pontius Pilate had Jesus nailed to a cross. And yet Paul is

emphatic that *the authorities that exist have been established by God*, therefore, we should *do what is right...not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience; this is why you pay taxes...*

When writing to the Romans in mid-century, Paul recognized that Roman imposed “peace” provided roads and safe sea travel for those sharing the Gospel. In 95 AD, when an emperor commanded his subjects worship him as God, the church refused to submit. In Revelation 13, the Roman Empire is called “the great whore of Babylon. But in Romans 13 the pagan Roman Empire was seen as “God’s servant.” Though bad government, it was God’s gift. If you doubt that bad government can be God’s servant, I suggest you give anarchy a try. About five years ago, Haiti went through a season of no functioning government, which created more misery than decades of dictatorship.

Since Paul wrote to the Romans, we have discovered that by God’s grace government can get better. None of the New Testament writers could have imagined government, in Lincoln’s words, “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” But in time, people with a Judeo-Christian heritage recognized that in a sinful world achieving the most just form of government requires the consent of the governed. Hence the radical concept of revolution conveyed in the Declaration of Independence,

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

It’s ironic that American Christians celebrate our nation’s rebellion against a king, but the founding fathers didn’t declare their independence recklessly. One of the signers was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian pastor. I imagine that he wrestled with whether the British government fit the situation of Romans 13 and Revelation 13. They envisioned a God-honoring replacement for the tyrannical monarch; an orderly government that would advance God’s desire for justice for all, while insuring people the right to worship God without coercion of any kind.

God has blessed the world by using courageous visionaries to craft democratic republics like the United States. Since 1776, many other wonderful countries guarantee their citizens have right to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” So we thank God for blessing the world by blessing the United States of America, especially how our nation, through struggle, became “a more perfect union,” eliminating slavery, protecting the vulnerable, guaranteeing civil rights. Our struggle continues. We debate the government’s role in stabilizing the economy, the government’s role in providing for the poor, the government’s role in protecting the environment, the government’s role in nurturing morality, the government’s role in influencing other nations. The best balance is still being sought. The United States is a work in progress. So let’s ask God to bless America through its Christian citizens.

First, you bless America when you **participate prayerfully** in our national life. Your country not only needs you to be involved, not just where it concerns you, not just for your good, but for the common good. Christians don’t just pursue their self-interest, they work for justice...they defend liberty for all. This means paying attention to what’s happening in our country, while trying to be aware of what God wants—God’s concern for justice, for the poor, for the vulnerable. As we will sing, “His truth is marching on.”

So don’t just read the newspaper, read the Bible; and pray for God to give you more of His heart and mind. Then get involved. Communicate with your elected leaders, write letters to the editor, show up at town hall meetings—not just to speak against the things that make you mad, but to speak for the causes that

would make a positive difference. Sometimes getting involved means that Christians undertake civil disobedience, their allegiance to God makes them willing to pay the price of breaking society's unjust laws, in order to change those laws.

As Christ-followers, we always participate civilly. Be respectful of leaders you oppose and people you disagree with.

Second, **serve sacrificially**. The most demanding service of country is service in the armed forces, especially when your life is at risk. Our nation also benefits when Christians are willing to serve as elected officials or when appointed to serve on government committees. Our land is blessed when we not only clean up after ourselves, but restore the environment ruined by others. Our population is blessed when we not only take care of our families, but sacrifice time and comfort to care for the fatherless and widows of our time.

Finally, **share Jesus graciously**. As Christ-followers, we know that the pursuit of happiness on our own is a dead end. As wonderful as it is to enjoy the blessings of this country, true freedom is found in a relationship with God, under the Lordship of Christ. Eternal life is the greatest good, so we seek to share the name of Jesus.

Yet this is a country where people are free not to believe. And we have come to recognize that using the government to advance our faith wasn't the best way to love our unbelieving neighbors. Being Christian Americans means respecting our neighbors who are Jews, Hindus, Muslims, even atheists. And we can trust that by seeking their best, the Holy Spirit will open many of their hearts, and we can share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with grace.

The best way for God's people to bless America is to become more like Christ. How good that today on this July 4th, we not only honor America, we also commune with the risen Christ. Having celebrated our national heritage, we now celebrate the communion of the saints, the bond we have with people from all nations who are baptized into Christ. Today we'll receive Communion by passing trays. Use the time to let the Spirit show you more of how he is with you to use you, not only to bless this nation, but to bless God's world.