

Full of Contradictions!

- Murray Watts, member of "Riding Lights", was talking to members of an audience after a street theatre performance in a pub car park. "Oh, I know all about Jesus and his miracles", said one person. His hand swept through the air, "Oh yes. Turning bricks into water. Things like that." Murray tentatively suggested that, generally speaking, Jesus' performed rather more useful miracles than turning bricks into water. "I will dissolve this temple in three days" somehow didn't sound right. "Oh well," his friend interrupted, "the Bible's full of contradictions anyway." "Which ones had you in mind?" asked Murray. "Well, the book of Proverbs for a start: 'Many hands make light work' and 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'"
 - one of those you hear often - "Bible's full of contradictions" - asking the person to tell you which ones can be a helpful way of starting into a real conversation!
- But you may be forgiven for thinking that the Bible is full of contradictions, given the passage we looked at this morning and the one this evening!
 - (Acts 5:29) Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"
 - (Romans 13:1) Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities...
- **Contradiction!**
- No, not really
 - and emphasises the importance of understanding the context, of not plucking verses out of the passage they are in, of understanding things within the broad sweep of Scripture, of thinking about what a verse is not saying as well as what it is saying
 - sometimes means we have to slow down and study more carefully, or ask questions of other Christians

Good Citizenship

- This passage is about the basic attitude Christians should have to governing authorities - local and national government and its agencies
 - as a consequence of what Jesus has done and revealed...
 - ...our attitude is to be one of grateful submission
 - there are limits to that, as we'll see, but that is to be our starting point
- According to the Right Honourable R Witney (former?) member for High Wycombe:
 - "The House of Commons begins its business with prayer each day. A chaplain follows the Speaker into the House and turns round, looks at the MPs assembled, and prays fervently that God will have mercy in the nation."
- The reason for this attitude of submission is also made abundantly clear:
 - it is because their authority is a delegated authority, delegated by God.
- Ultimately there is no authority apart from God - any other authority is exercised solely because he permits it
 - whether in church, in society, or even in the spiritual realm (book of Job reveals Satan permitted to test Job...).
- So, the governing authorities have been established by God.
- That's why rebellion against the authorities is wrong - not because of any intrinsic right to rule they might have - but because, whatever form the government takes (democracy, dictatorship, communism, a ruling monarchy, ...), its authority stems from God - & so rebellion is rebellion against what God has established.
- Corollary of this is the responsibility which, by implication, is laid on governments to rule in accordance with God's revealed character, nature, and standards - with justice, with a concern for truth, with a hatred of oppression and wrong-doing.
- That's why "rulers hold no terror for those who do right" (v.3) - because the kind of

ruler Paul has in mind here is one who is rightly exercising his God-given authority.

- Those who do right will be doing exactly what that ruler desires!
- The flip side of this, however, is that God has delegated not just responsibility to rule, but also something of the responsibility to effect judgement too.
- The sword here (v.4), rather as it does in the hands of the statue of Justice above the Old Bailey in London, symbolises the possibility of punishment.
- *(a sword was the symbol of a Roman magistrate's rule - possibly even of his right to impose the death penalty.)*
- In this sword-bearing, the judge, the representative of the authorities are acting as God's servant and agent to bring punishment to the wrong-doer.
- Now, all of this is not a complete statement of Scripture's view of the relationship between believer and government, but it is a large component of that view, and provides an essential framework for the rest of that discussion.
- Basic attitude is to be one of submission, one of respect towards God's appointed ruler

Areas of Application

- That basic attitude of submission will cash itself out in all sorts of areas - and will stand out in our society!
- Have you ever noticed that we live in a world where what you can get away with with is what is right?
- That's the attitude of the person dropping litter... of the person speeding knowing the Police rarely have resources to set up speed-traps... of the person "neglecting" to let the Inland Revenue know of all their circumstances.
- All of those, and hundreds of others which I'm often as guilty of as the next person, simply indicate that we do not respect the government - we will not submit to those granted authority to rule by the Living God Himself!
- What arrogance! What pride!
- "I know better than God!!"
- That attitude is also inevitably tied up with the huge breakdown of any sense of community in our society today:
 - I'll do things that suit **ME**, not others;
 - I'll risk someone else's life so I can get to work more quickly;
 - I'll diddle the Revenue so I don't have to pay my full whack - even though others will have to pick up the bill.
- Alienates us from anything positive the government seeks to do:
 - rather than being participants in the life of the community, we become spectators, and cynical ones at that!
- Let us so demonstrate that constructive warm submission to God's authorities, that sense of participation in the life of our local communities, that support of the best that government seeks to be, so that we win others over too.
- Lets not, though, become petty legalists - shaking our heads and tut-tutting at the speeding Christian, scrupulously keeping our own hands clean without becoming participants in the messy, ambivalent business of real community life.

Unanswered Questions!

- That is all very well, but leaves us with two rather large unanswered questions:
- 1. Doesn't all that I have said, even all that Paul has said, contradict what Paul said just a couple of verse before the beginning of chapter 13, where he quotes Deuteronomy 32:35: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom 12:19)?
 - (contrast government as able to enact judgement.)
- 2. What happens when the government gets it wrong?
 - (civil disobedience?)
- Not only do we not have the time to deal with these adequately tonight, but this

passage in Romans 13 does not speak directly to all that might need to be said to answer them fully.

- However, do think it is important we get a toe-hold into them briefly, so we are not left dangling!

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay..."?

- In Romans 12 Paul has been driving home the attitude of self-giving love that should characterise the Christian's life.
- Echoing Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38, Paul exhorts (v.19) Christians not to take their rightful dues - of vengeance, of recompense - but rather, knowing our imperfections and propensity for twisting right into wrong, to leave it all up to God.
- Should this not be the standard applied to all of life, to every sphere?
- Paul, realising that this might be one over-eager conclusion, moves straight on into chapter 13, the passage we've explored tonight - and makes a critical distinction:
 - the State and the individual have different roles and responsibilities, and so where the Christian individual is forbidden from taking private vengeance, the State may continue to take punitive action.
- This does not write the State a blank cheque, as we shall see, for it must bear that heavy responsibility faithfully - to match the execution of its responsibilities with the standards and approach of the one who gave it that responsibility.

Civil Disobedience?

- When I gave examples of practical submission to the authorities earlier on I carefully chose those that few would basically disagree with!
- We may grumble about taxes, and ignore many of the laws of the road, but if pushed we'd basically agree they were a good thing.
- But what about some other areas....?
 - war?
 - employment law - becoming harder for Christian organisations to say "Christians only"
 - environment?
 - abortion?
 - euthanasia?
- Its an awful lot less clear cut!
- Can we disobey our conscience on one these matters to submit to the authorities? Or can we put to one side our submission to the authorities as a matter of conscience?

- v.4 describes the State's representative as "God's servant" - thus granting him a special dignity and authority:
 - but at the same time stresses that his position is a subordinate one.
- The ruler, whether individual or corporate, may do, not whatever he wishes, but what the will of God is for him in his situation.
- When the ruler steps outside that, then while the Christian should still adopt an attitude of respect and a certain amount of submission, he may not be bound to obey that State, government, ruler.
- For the Christian is, as Peter noted in Acts 5:29, to obey God rather than men.
- But even as we admit the possibility of that, we must be careful to guard against our own selfish natures, our own sinful flaws, which might use this as an excuse to opt out of some onerous duty!

Love Your Neighbour

- Underlying attitude to all this is a love for our fellow humans
- Steve could have been very condemning of Andy in his relationship to his first wife, his living with his girlfriend, his toying with working "cash in hand"
 - but rather than condemn, he chose to get involved, to build a relationship of care, concern, patience, understanding
 - he "loved his neighbour as himself", he modelled good citizenship, that striving for a wholesome community based on God's laws but never degenerating into

petty legalism.

- he sought to bring his friend Andy to the point where he would willingly and gladly live in obedience to God's law, but never sought to **impose** that law upon him - even though he knew it would work out best for him in the long run!
- How will you love your neighbour this week?
 - decide now!

Understanding the Present Time

- Live for God since he is coming soon!
 - heaven, the reality of his eternal reign will be one where his rule is made manifest
 - if that's where we're heading, lets get ready in the way we live now!
 - lets seek to match who we are with who God is making us into!
- At dawn you don't start getting your torch out - you start getting ready for a day filled with light
 - we live at the dawn of the age to come - lets live getting ready for the light
- That's what "**clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ**" (v.14) is all about:
 - though we ourselves are not righteous, we "put on", choose to adopt the same righteous attitudes and actions as Jesus did
- **Good citizens of earth, anticipating our citizenship in heaven!!**