

TO FACE A CHALLENGING NEW YEAR
Romans 1:1-6; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-17

Each year as we begin anew, we say the same kinds of things. We say that we are starting out with a clean slate. We have opportunity now to begin again. We might say that we can now forget about all the mistakes of 2019 and do better in 2020. We conclude that the new year is full of opportunity. So let's do better. Yay!

Okay, the cheers and pep talks are nice, as far as they go. But they don't go very far. Talk is still cheap and real life is still challenging. It isn't like there is this nice clean break at midnight on December 31st and a bright new day dawning on January 1st. No we are the same people, living in the same circumstances, and required to muddle through the same problems that we were muddling through last week, last month, last year. Sounds a bit like Ecclesiastes doesn't it?

I feel especially apprehensive about 2020. The reason for the apprehension is because it is an election year, and our society is more divided ideologically than it has been since the mid-nineteenth century and the War Between the States. In the past few weeks, I have read multiple news reports and results of surveys that indicate that, on a large scale, Americans are fearful. We do not know what to expect. The past few years have been charged to say the least, often resulting in verbal threats and spilling over into actual violence. Could our culture fall over the precipice of anarchy this year?

Worse, in my opinion, is that this ideological divide is affecting the Christian community. Professing Christians are drawing lines in the sand and saying, "God is on our side and against you." That kind of sin and foolishness is not acceptable in the larger scope of

Christianity. And it is definitely not acceptable in Community Baptist Church.

The positions and arguments of the great divide are bound to find their way into our thinking and conversations. We do not live in a vacuum. I think that most of our people at CBC are thinkers and readers. We like to know what is going on in our world. However, we are also made of flesh, and it is easy for us to get caught up in the fray. Therefore, I do hear chatter in the church on both sides of this "war." That concerns me most of all because it is an indication that we are ignoring the very clear fences that God has already established for us in these very matters. In light of this situation, as we face the new year, it behooves us to consider the three very clear statements God gives to us concerning our relationship with our political leaders. Then we will end by thinking about how those statements apply to our precise circumstances.

Three Statements that Establish Fences.

The first statement from God requires His people to be subject to authorities because God appoints them (Romans 1:1-6). It is important for God's people to understand God's plan from this text. First, we learn that God institutes authorities for our benefit. *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (v.1).*

This statement reminds us that human nature is so corrupt that it has to have clearly defined laws and boundaries or it will self-destruct. Without the authorities maintaining order, it is every man for himself, every person doing what is right in their own eyes. A society cannot exist without governing authorities.

This boundary is established and enforced by force. God gives authorities the power to punish sin and wickedness. *For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval (v.3).* Obviously, it is not a good idea to resist a God-ordained authority since He gives them the right to punish resisters.

But, more than that (and especially important to Christians), to resist God-appointed authorities is to bring God's judgment on yourself. *Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment (v.2).* A real Christian abhors the possibility of making God angry and bringing His judgment upon themselves.

But does God really care? In this day, would God react to our disrespecting ungodly rulers? Yes, because to resist God's authority is to resist the servant of God. *For he is God's servant for your good. But 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 (v.4).* God's servant is expected to do God's work. And that includes punishing those who resist.

Why should we do what God requires here? We submit in order to avoid divine punishment. *Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath (v.5a).* Again, a true follower of Christ is not interested in bringing God's wrath into his or her life. And also Christians submit to this rule in order to maintain a clear conscience. Not only do we wish to avoid God's displeasure and punishment, but because we know this is God's rule, we obey *also for the sake of conscience (v.5b).*

So far so good, right? Sure, God ordains authorities, and, sure, we ought to do what they tell us to do. That is until it comes to paying taxes. Oh, but in this same context, God reveals that submission to His servants requires us paying taxes to them. *For the same reason you also pay taxes (v.5c).* But, what if the authority does bad stuff with our tax money? What if the taxes are too high or unfair? I think it is interesting that God didn't address that issue. It is also interesting also to compare the actual context into which this was written. The first-century Roman culture and political scene was not exactly heaven on earth. We submit, which includes paying taxes, because they are God's ministers doing the work of God. *For the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing (v.5d).*

The second fence that God has given regarding our relationship with our authorities is that we should pray for authorities in order to live peaceful lives (1 Timothy 2:1-4). We are to pray for all kinds of authorities. *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers,*

intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions (vv.1-2a).

The command to pray is in the present tense which requires that we pray always or pray habitually for leaders. Notice the three different words for prayer. They are somewhat significant. Supplications are requests or the expression of desire. Prayers is a more general term, but important because it speaks of earnest conversation directed toward God. Intercessions is very important in this requirement because it means to make requests or talk to God in behalf of someone else. That is especially an important ministry necessary when "someone else" isn't talking to God. It is necessary also when a person does not know for what to pray (as the Holy Spirit prays for us, and as our Savior Christ intercedes for us with God the Father).

God instructs us to pray for everyone, which cannot literally mean all people, but all kinds of people. But specifically we are to pray for our rulers. That includes our president who is in a high position. Our senators and congressmen are also in high positions and need prayer. We come to realize that realistically we cannot pray for each of our leaders individually everyday. But you can and should pray for the rulers who are responsible for you. We really ought to pray every day for President Trump, Vice-President Pence, Senators Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott, and Congressman William Timmons. We should also pray regularly for our Governor Henry McMaster.

For what do we pray? We are to pray in order to live peaceful lives. Make requests, pray, and intercede *that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way (v.2b).* These simple reasons are why we must diligently pray for our leaders. God's desire is for us to be able to live peaceful and quiet lives. God's desire is for us to have opportunity to live godly and dignified lives.

For the most part, this is not happening in America right now. We live in fear and doubt. We are dealing with ungodly laws and decrees being forced on us. We are in turmoil. Our society has become the "hurricane" I talked about last Sunday evening. I fear that as a culture, we are inches from falling over the edge of the cliff into anarchy. I fear that the violence we witnessed in Charlottesville, VA

in August 2017 and the violence we witness in Portland, OR every few months could easily become commonplace.

Is that God's will? Is anarchy, rebellion against authority, civil war God's will? Not according to this instruction (v. 2). We are supposed to be praying that such things don't happen. Is it wise to pray for our leaders to have wisdom to keep us out of anarchy and then use our tongues or pens to stir the pot? No, that is hypocrisy.

As a whole, our culture is the opposite of what pleases God our Savior. A peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way, *is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior (v.3)*. Does God just want us to have a nice, quiet, pleasant life? Well yes, that would be a blessing from Him. But the greater reason is because God our Savior desires an environment where the gospel will have free course.

We are to pray for an environment conducive to gospel proclamation. God our Savior *desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (v.4)*. God our Creator knows that our disrupted, chaotic environment is not conducive to the progress of the gospel. So does Satan. Pray for our leaders that they will establish and maintain a peaceful, quiet, godly and dignified society.

The third fence God has given to us in our relationship with authorities is to honor authorities as a testimony (1 Peter 2:13-17). Notice the specific position we should honor – every human institution of government. *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution (v.13a)*. God did not specifically invent our representative form of government. That is why we don't see words like president, senator, congressman in this instruction.

God did not specifically introduce representative government for nations but He permits it, as well as other forms of government. He also ordains specific leaders within that allowed form. So we submit *whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good (v.13b-14)*. Honor, love, and fear are obvious, understood, and to be practiced broadly as in *Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor (v.17)*. Simply put, we should not talk about our rulers in a way that we wouldn't talk about a friend or even God.

Why should this be the character of our lives? Our testimony about trusting God is at stake. Do we trust God? Do we trust God's will? *For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people (v.15)*. We must be careful about our public respect for our leaders because ignorant and foolish people are watching. They don't believe God. We say that we do, but then we might act like we don't by criticizing the clear expression of God's will. Show them the goodness of God's will. God uses quiet, godly submission to accomplish what blustering, foolish accusations cannot accomplish.

Showing honor to authorities is just how God's servants live. *Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God (v.16)*. So how does that work in real life?

Application of the Fences.

To what kind of rulers in our lives do these fences apply? It is quite clear that God's rule is for us to honor and submit to those whom He puts in the position of leadership. Yeah, but what if you have a bad president? What is a bad president compared to the rulers God was talking about? We have no earthly experience how bad a ruler can be (the kind of rulers God told His people to honor).

Let's briefly consider the exact people to whom this rule applied originally. Nero was the emperor when Paul wrote Romans, when Paul wrote 1 Timothy, and when Peter wrote 1 Peter. When they used the word king or emperor, they were thinking about Nero. He was not only one of the most wicked emperors in history, but among the most evil, wicked people who ever lived. He supposedly caused the fire that leveled much of Rome but admitted no responsibility and showed no remorse. In fact, to deflect attention from himself, he blamed Christians and used it as an excuse to execute hundreds of Christians, some of whom he lit on fire to provide light at night. And why wouldn't he kill people from that fringe sect of Roman culture when he even killed his mother and his first wife because they disagreed with him.

Caligula was a wicked emperor who ruled before Nero did (37-41). He wasn't much better. He was not famous for murder, but he

was famous for lustful debauchery and maybe insanity. Did God expect His people to respect rulers like that? Yes.

Before Caligula, there were guys like Herod, Pilate, Quirinius, or Caesar Augustus. All of these rulers figured significantly in Christ's earthly ministry. They were not much better than Nero or Caligula. They were pagans who worshiped themselves first. This was especially true of Augustus who required people to worship him at the penalty of death. All of these rulers made make-believe gods to replace the True God when it was expedient. They killed many innocent people, including their own wives when it seemed necessary. And some of them were responsible for killing God the Son! Show honor to people like that?

Let's look back at the Old Testament to the kind of rulers God ordained and used. One of the better known rulers was Darius the Mede. He did not attend Sunday School or small group. He was a pagan. We are happy that he perceived that Daniel was a servant of the true God. But that didn't stop him from throwing Daniel into a den of lions and then hoping somehow that Daniel's God would fix things.

Cyrus was pagan as any other ancient king. But history is very clear to state that God raised up this king, used him in remarkable ways, and even referred to him as "My servant." Cyrus was not a Christian and not even a Jew.

One of the most famous pagan kings in the Old Testament times was Nebuchadnezzar. God had promised for years to raise up this king to do His work of wiping out Jerusalem, Judea, and taking His people captive to Babylon. This king, ordained by and raised up by God, was so pagan that he demanded worship of an idol representing himself. When three Hebrews respectfully declined out of love for God, Nebuchadnezzar threw them into the furnace. And what ruler in history was more arrogant or obnoxious than this guy? But God expected His people to honor him. And the ones named in Scripture did.

Sargon II was a horribly wicked king. He didn't come to power over the Assyrian Empire simply because he was wise, shrewd, and violent. God raised him up to punish His own people Israel.

Listen to what God said about Pharaoh: *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" (Romans 9:17). Even while Moses and Aaron were leading God's people to freedom from Pharaoh, they showed honor.

That leads us to wonder if the same kinds of fences apply to presidents? Really, which of our presidents or governing officials have been even close to as bad as the very people who God clearly instructed His people to submit to? I have lived under the leadership of a dozen presidents. I have not cared much for most of them. Some of them were okay, in my opinion. Some of them were just plain bad, in my opinion. We are allowed to hold opinions about our leaders, but we are not allowed to disrespect them.

For example, the first president in my life was Dwight Eisenhower. I was too young to know whether he was good, bad or ugly. I have seen pictures and I don't think he was ugly. But I cannot testify whether he was good or bad.

Then there was John Kennedy. I was still quite young, but old enough to hear what the adults were saying about him. Some of them thought he was great and some of them thought he was dangerous. But back in that day, all of the adults gave each other the right to disagree. We don't live there anymore.

Then there was Lyndon Johnson. During his tenure, I was a teenager, but old enough to begin to sense or understand political ideology. Even then I was of the opinion that socialism, expanding the bureaucracy, and creating an "entitlement class" was not good government.

Richard Nixon was the first president I voted for. In 1971, the 26th amendment lowered the voting age to 18. So in 1972 I cast my vote for Richard Nixon. I didn't vote for him because I had a good opinion of him or even because I trusted him. I simply concluded that he was the lesser of two evils. Time proved that he was not much "lesser."

Gerald Ford was to me like a substitute teacher. He never really accomplished anything. But then, we never expected him to. He was like vanilla ice cream. That is mostly because Ford was the only president who was not elected to either the presidency or vice-presidency.

I could go on and express my opinions about Jimmy Carter, George H. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama.

Suffice it to say, that Ronald Reagan was the only president in my lifetime who I liked, and, for the most part, trusted. But, who cares about my opinion? Exactly. This is America where we are given the opportunity to form opinions, express our opinions in campaign rhetoric, and at the ballot box. You have as much right to your opinion as I have to mine.

But when we become so ingrained in our opinions that fellow citizens, and especially fellow Christians, turn against each other and break fellowship because of it, we have transgressed God's boundary. We have jumped over His fence.

God unfolds His plan in all kinds of rulers. There is a very simple statement in the story about Rehoboam that proves how God brought about His will about kingship and authority through Rehoboam's stubbornness. *So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1 Kings 12:15).*

Here is the larger part of the story. Solomon disobeyed God's clear instruction to follow God in faith and submission. God, in response, kept His promise to remove the kingdom from David's posterity. Rehoboam was David's grandson. When given the opportunity to be kind, he acted the part of the fool because God allowed him to do it. God could have stepped in and stopped Rehoboam. But it was God's will for him to offend the people in order to split His kingdom. It was all part of God's plan. When will we learn that God uses all kinds of people to bring about His plans?

God does His will through rulers. Solomon observed that *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will (Proverbs 21:1).* No ruler, no matter how wicked, is more powerful than God. God is not the author of evil. But God does allow rulers (like Pharaoh) to harden their hearts against Him. Ultimately, God is using rulers throughout the world, throughout history to bring about His will for His glory. The same is still true today.

Therefore, our authorities are not in office accidentally. Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar that God is in charge of who is in charge. *He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have*

understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him (Daniel 2:21-22). This principle has not died or changed. Our authorities are the people God desires to be in office at this time. We are very foolish people to think that our process of electing rulers somehow overrules God's power and will.

I read a news article this week that brought back memories. I remember even as a teenager hearing a teacher talk about the immigration policy changes that President Lyndon Johnson put in place in 1968. After the 2020 census is taken, there will be a reshaping of congressional districts, which impacts the electoral college, which determines the outcome of the congressional and presidential election. It is clear now that in the second generation after Johnson's changes to the immigration policy, conservatives will lose 25 congressional seats to liberals. That was the plan. In light of that seemingly hopeless situation, "Do you think God is surprised?" Stop wringing your hands. God raises up leaders and He puts down leaders.

Finally, God has a unique desire for His people. God expressed His desire for His chosen people in the past. Through Jeremiah, God said to His people, *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:7).* This was very hard instruction to take. God's people had disobeyed until God finally had the king of Babylon take them captive. In a captive land, living under the rule of pagans, God told His people to contribute to society. Why would God want His people to settle down and help a pagan culture? God wants peace for His people.

God still clearly states His desire for His people today. We read God's desire in the passage from 1 Timothy. *[Pray] for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:2-4).*

God wants you to live in peace. God wants you to be able to live a reverent, dignified, quiet life. This kind of life is pleasing to God. This is God's will in the midst of a world sunk in chaos because of sin. People all around you are clamoring for change. Most of the

people around you have no concept of eternal life. Most of the people around you are sure they can create utopia in a sinful passing world. Most of the people around you do not trust your God. You must trust God, do what God says, and live in peace.

God does not require us to like our governing leaders. He does not even require us to appreciate them or to trust them. He requires us to submit to them, pray for them, and honor them. And even when we feel like we cannot with a clear conscience honor a person who is despicable in our opinion, we still must honor the position and the office.

That is easy to say but hard to do because you really cannot separate the individual from the office when you show honor. For example, if a person was sitting as president who you really do not like, and if that president entered a room where you were seated, would you stand out of respect and honor the person? If not, you disobeyed God.

Indeed, if we do not pray for, intercede for, obey, respect, and honor our leaders – especially when they are not demanding that we disobey God's Word – we are disobeying God. We are going into what will probably prove to be a chaotic year politically. Let's rise above the fray by doing the simple three statements that God has given to us.