**Committing Ourselves to Good Citizenship**

**Romans 13:1-7 (ESV)**

March 11, 2018

Dr. Ritch Boerckel

***1*** *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.* ***2****Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.* ***3*** *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,* ***4*** *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.* ***5*** *Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.* ***6*** *For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.* ***7*** *Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*

Does it really matter whether Christians are the best citizens in their own countries? After all, the Bible says that when we place our faith in Jesus, we become citizens of God’s new kingdom. We no longer set our minds on the things below here in this world, but we are called to set our minds on things above. After all, our life is there. It is hidden with Christ in God. The Apostle Paul, to the church in Philippi says,

**Philippians 3:20-21** But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Someone asks, “Well, if our eternal future is in heaven and our citizenship is in heaven, why should we care anything about the nations or governments of this world? Why should we have any participation, any part as citizens here in this present kingdom?” Some may argue for a disengagement with human authorities based upon our spiritual union with Jesus. But they would be wrong! They would be wrong because the Bible has given us clear instructions on how we as Christians are to engage with human authorities, with human government.

We open up our Bibles to Romans 13 this morning and we learn that God does indeed care about the kind of citizens we are to the earthly governments in which God has placed us. The main idea taught here is simply that our radical worship of God leads us to commit ourselves to be the very best of citizens here in this world. So we want to track the flow of Paul’s argument leading up to Romans 13. Paul explains to us this amazing Gospel of God’s grace in the first eleven chapters of this letter to the church in Rome. And then at the beginning of chapter 12 he makes this appeal.

**Romans 12:1-2** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

It’s reasonable that we should give ourselves so wholly to God. That’s a call to radical worship. This is not the kind of worship that comes on a Sunday morning and sings a few songs and prays a few prayers and listens to a nice message, then goes home unchanged. It’s a call to radical worship! Every part of ourselves, every moment of our lives is given to the express purpose of communicating God’s great worth.

In sharing with us this call to radical worship, the Apostle Paul then begins to explain what that radical worship looks like in every day life. The truth that he’s driving home is that the most reasonable response in view of God’s mercies in forgiving us, in freeing us, in adopting us, in loving us, in securing us and in electing us, is that we would present our whole person to God for His use and for His worship. And as we refuse to be squeezed into the world’s way of thinking, this world’s way of behaving that’s anti-worship, and as we press in to becoming more and more transformed into the likeness of Jesus through the Gospel, by God’s Spirit, then we come to realize that God’s will is amazing! It’s perfect! It’s good! It’s acceptable!

So we ask the question: But how specifically do we present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice? That’s a metaphor and it’s hard to get our minds around what exactly is entailed in presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. Paul then goes on to makea number of applications that radical worship leads us to. In Romans 12:3-9 he says if your life is wholly devoted to God, then you will use these spiritual gifts that God has given you in ministry in the local church to fulfill Jesus’ mission. So radical worship, a life of presenting oneself completely to God, will cause that life and lead that life to use those spiritual gifts in ministry in the local church.

And then in Romans 12:9-13 Paul goes on to say the second application. He says that if you present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, you will also love other people, your brothers and sisters in your own local church family. You’ll be concerned about one another and care for one another and stimulate one another to love and good deeds. And then he says in Romans 12:14-21, if you present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, you will then bless your enemies. You will bless those who curse you and you won’t be overcome by evil, but rather, you will overcome evil with good.

So now we come to Romans chapter 13, and God teaches us this fourth application of what it practically means to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. And God tells us that radical worship to God leads us to being the very best of earthly citizens. Our faith in Jesus does not diminish our engagement with human authorities, but rather intensifies it. Our faith is not the faith of an ivory tower that operates only in religious contexts. But our faith is shoe leather faith. It’s relevant to everyday life. So every relationship that we have in this world is impacted by our union with Jesus. And that’s particularly true of the relationships with people who are in authority over us. We learn from Scripture that our submission to God always ties us to a heart of submission to every God-given authority in our lives.

God designs this world and human society so that every one of us would live in a relationship of submission to someone. We all have human authorities to which we place ourselves under. It’s true in the family, it’s true in the workplace, it’s true in the classroom, it’s true in the local community, it’s true in our nation, and it’s true in the church. So, getting these human authority relationships right is central to our worship of God. It’s not something peripheral, but it’s at the very center of what it means for us to worship God, to get human authority relationships right, the way God has ordained them. Our submission to God radically changes the way that we respond to human authority. If we get human authority relationships wrong, we will suffer the loss of God’s wonderful design of His will and proving that His will actually is good and acceptable and perfect. So what does God say about our relationship to human government? Well, first we find in Romans 13:1 a command. That command is simply stated: **Every worshipper must submit to governing authorities.**

***1*** *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.*

Let me ask you: Have you ever been frustrated or disappointed with human government? Perhaps you are upset at human government over some very serious and significant matters. You shake your head over the evil of your taxes paying for the killing of infants in their mother’s womb. You grieve over economic policies that create poverty and untold suffering. You grow anxious over foreign policies that may lead to unnecessary war. How should we as Christians respond to these concerns?

Many also experience frustrations with government at a much smaller, a more personal scale. The police officer who pulls us over is rude. The TSA agent seems to take joy in going through our stuff and patting us down. The DMV line is mercilessly long. The tax forms we’re filling out are cruelly complex. For most of us, our common interactions with the government are often frustrating. So when we experience the flaws of human government, we’re tempted to think that we’re right to dishonor our governing authorities or even to disobey them. We may think, “Well, government does not care about me, why should I care about it?”

Now here’s the truth. All human governments are deeply flawed because the people who lead and serve them are deeply flawed. Every one of us are born in the context of sin. Our hearts are sinful. And so, there are no perfect governments until Jesus Himself comes and sits upon the throne. Until then, we deal with human authorities that are flawed, that often don’t make the decisions that align with what’s right or with what is true. And yet, God tells us in the context of flawed human governments,

***1*** *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.*

The word “be subject” means that we’re to hold a voluntary attitude of cooperation. We’re to maintain a happy willingness to follow directions, to obey laws, to cultivate a true respect and honor for those people who are in positions of authority. It means we don’t hold a spirit of general rebellion and contempt to authority. It means we refuse to speak or act in ways that dishonors the offices that governing authority holds. Now, being subject does not mean that we never point out sins or wrongs done by governing authority. But it means when we do point out those sins or do point out those wrongs, we do it with a spirit of honor, humility and respect; not with a heart of proud disdain and contempt.

So how do we practically apply this command for us to be subject to governing authorities? Well, I think there are at least five applications that I want us to consider.

1. Pay your taxes in full and on time with a humble heart.

Paul himself is going to make this very application plain at the end of this section.

***7*** *Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed…*

Jesus is going to say, “Pay to Caesar what is Caesar’s and pay to God what is God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) Evidently, the believers in the 1st Century didn’t like to pay taxes anymore than believers in the 21st Century do. Paul wouldn’t have had to give this command if it were an easy thing and a natural thing to follow. Taxes are obligations that human governments require from us. For the believer, they are a test of spiritual integrity. To refuse to pay taxes is not only a crime against our government, but it’s a sin against God.

I like what Justice William Howard Taft said on this matter. He was the Chief Justice; part of the Supreme Court. And this is what he said, “It is the duty of every citizen to avoid payment of all taxes and to evade payment of none.” In other words, if you can legally avoid paying taxes, do it. We’re not called to pay more than what the government requires of us. But once we understand what government requires of us, it would be illegal, it would be criminal, and indeed it would be sinful to evade paying what is owed.

2. Pray for our governing authorities.

I think this is perhaps the most foundational, fundamental application of a submissive attitude to human authority. One of the greatest ways we believers can prove a right heart attitude toward people in authority over us is through praying for them. And so Paul would say to Timothy,

**1 Timothy 2:1-2** 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, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

What do you suppose would happen if we believers prayed for our governing authorities? If leaders in government became what we Christians prayed that they would become, would they be transformed? If leaders in government changed their decisions based upon our prayers for them, would our leaders make different decisions? The answers to those questions will be defined by the question, “Do I really pray for my governing authorities?” So we can’t expect our human leaders to be something we’re not praying that God would make them be. We cannot expect that our leaders would make decisions that we’re not praying that they would make, out of our desire for God to be glorified.

The greatest influence we can have upon our governing leaders is not through letters. It’s not through rallies. It’s not through protests. But it’s through prayer. Letters are good and rallies and protests are not wrong in themselves. But prayer is infinitely superior. Before we do anything else, it’s vital that we pray. Listen to what God says in Proverbs 8.

**Proverbs 8:15-16** By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.

It’s by God that rulers understand what is right and they decree what is right. So if we desire human authorities to govern rightly, then let’s pray. From the early days of the church when Christians were often persecuted by human authority, our practice as Christians has been to pray for governing authorities. Over and over again this is the testimony of the early church fathers. One early church leader was a man by the name of Tertullian, who around 200 AD, writes a defense of Christianity to Roman magistrates. He recognizes that Roman magistrates have a skewed view of what a Christian really is, and that’s why they’re so intensely persecuting Christians. So he writes to them saying, “This is what we’re about.” And this is what Tertullian writes around 200 AD.

“We (Christians) offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God, whose favor, beyond all other things, they must themselves desire…Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection for the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest--whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish.”

He says, “There’s not an emperor that has ever taken the throne that we Christians haven’t prayed for them.” He says, “Why would you persecute us? We are people who pray for you. We pray for all of these blessings upon you. We’re the kind of people that we believe every emperor would want to have as citizens in their kingdom.” Here’s the question: Can that description that Tertullian gave of Christians in 200 AD, in the 2nd Century, does it describe our life? Does it describe our church? That’s the question. Pray for our governing authorities. Make that a central part of our prayer life.

3. Obey the laws.

Governing authorities have a right to make laws, create laws. In a fallen world, not all of those laws will be just. And we are right to disobey laws if they defy God’s laws or if they demand that we act contrary to our biblically informed conscience. So our obedience to the state is not absolute.

For instance, Daniel continues to pray even though there was an edict from the king: thou shalt not pray! Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to the statue even though there was a command: everyone must bow down to the statue! The Hebrew midwives refused to kill the male babies even though Pharaoh’s edict commanded them to kill male babies. Peter continued to preach in Jesus’ name even though the authorities told him: thou shalt not preach in Jesus’ name! So here’s the principle.

If government forbids what God commands or commands what God forbids, we are right to disobey government. Now, we should expect to suffer for that, to suffer for the cause of Christ. But in the end, we must obey God rather than men. God is the first authority. Human governments derive their authority from Him. And so where these two contradict, we always submit to the higher authority, to God Himself. But we do so without a spirit of anarchy in our hearts. It’s not because we just want to make trouble and we want to overturn the establishment. It’s because we just simply want to worship God and we must obey Him in all things. So we are right to disobey any law that demands we disobey God.

But otherwise, we must not arbitrarily pick and choose for ourselves which laws we will obey and which laws we choose to disobey. If the zoning code requires an expensive permit before we modify that deck upon our home, we get the permit. If the state requires homeschoolers to register with the state, we’re going to register with the state. If the state requires teenagers to be in school on senior skip day, we as parents will say, “You need to be in school and we’re not going to write you a note, if you’re not.” There is nothing wrong with working to change what we consider to be unwise or unjust laws. There is everything right about that. But we are a people who at the very core of our response, submits to human government. We recognize that God has given human government for our good and the good of humanity.

Let me tell you a bit of a story to illustrate how easy it is for us to begin to drift. So when I was a youth pastor, I had just started off in this very good church. It was a God-centered, Gospel church. We were going to take some teenagers to Colorado. And there were a couple elders who were going to lead out a caravan of Suburban’s. We didn’t have a bus, so there were a bunch of Suburban’s traveling across west Texas. Now if you’ve ever traveled across west Texas, there is a whole lot of nothing for a long, long period of time. And it is a bit maddening to go the speed limit when there is just nothing around for a long period of time. And so it was decided by the elders that this one particular elder would be the lead vehicle because he had a radar detector in his vehicle. (Congregational Laughter!) And “zoom!” Off they went.

At this time, especially, I was having a real soft conscience about even going one mile over the speed limit. That’s where I was. And they’re going 95 miles an hour down the highway. Just zoom! And I kept falling further and further behind. And I could tell that I was getting on their nerves because I wasn’t participating in everything. And they were talking back, “What’s going on. Is everything okay?” Yeah. Everything is okay. I finally just told them, “I know where the camp is. I might get there three or four hours after y’all. I’m not trying to hold you up, but I just can’t go this fast.” And so we’d stop for gas, and all the other teenagers would come and say, “Ritch, how come you’re not keeping up?” You could tell they were talking about it. And there was this whole kind of conflict taking place between me and these other guys and then other people in the car.

Now my dear wife, Kimberly, was completely oblivious to any conflict going on the entire trip. She was just talking and having a great time with the girls in the back of the Suburban. Everything was great and peaceful and fuzzy and warm. And so, we stopped for lunch. And Kimberly gets out and I let her go through the line first. And then she proceeds to go over to the family of the lead car, who I’ve been having all this conflict with, and sat down. She didn’t know anything was going wrong. She just sits down. So I was thinking, “Okay. I’ll go over there.” I knew that they didn’t like me at this time, but I hadn’t told Kimberly about anything. Somehow, the idea of a speed limit came up and she had no idea we were going over the speed limit. She had no idea what was happening. And when it came up, something popped in her head and she said to the whole group, “You know, some Christians have fuzz busters in their car.” (Congregational Laughter!) She said, “Can you believe it? All a fuzz buster is to do is to help you break the law!” (Congregational Laughter!) And she expected a hearty, “Amen, Sister!” Instead it was like this lead balloon.

So a couple elder meetings later, there was another elder whose son ironically got a speeding ticket at another youth event where he was driving on his own. And so they decided to talk about this, about driving on youth trips. And in the wisdom of the elders, they decided that night, it was an edict for the church that from now on, when you’re on youth trips, you can’t go more than 5 miles an hour over the speed limit. So I thought, “Well, that’s an interesting edict.”

These are blessed people. These are Gospel people. These are Bible-believing people. But for this window in their experience, they lost clarity on what God’s Word teaches. And I say that not to down on them. Again, I have high respect for these as dear brothers. But I say that to say it’s easy for us all to do; to begin to make compromises that chip away at the basic building blocks of our response to human authority.

4. Be an influence for good in your community.

Here’s what Peter says.

**1 Peter 2:13-17** Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, 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. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Live in a way that the whole of the church and the whole of your community is blessed as a result of your right response. It’s righteous for Christians to engage with this world. It’s wrong for Christians to isolate themselves from this world. It’s right for us to be involved in noble works that align ourselves in healthy ways to human authority; ways that promote others’ well-being. It’s right for us to pray to discover ways that we can be a positive influence through our submission to human authorities, to bless our communities. Look for ways to bless your neighborhood, your school district, your community, your nation. You know, God intends that because of His people’s presence and participation, that our community and nation is healthier and happier, more righteous, more beautiful, more stable because we’re here.

5. Speak about your governing leaders with honor and respect.

***7*** *…respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*

Again, it is right to dissent strongly when leaders make decisions that dishonor God or that hurt people. It’s right to point out wickedness in their lives, in their personal lives. John the Baptist did this with Herod, and ultimately, he was executed for it. He said, “Herod, you stole your brother’s wife, and that’s wrong!” And John the Baptist ultimately had his head chopped off as a result of that. But when we confront leaders, we do it with a spirit of humility and submission. We do not do it with tones of rebellion, contempt or hostility in our voice. Submission does not mean silence, but it does mean that as we speak with clarity and strength, we don’t curse the persons. We don’t treat them contemptibly.

When referencing the President of the United States, for instance, I think it right to use a title. Now that’s my application. I don’t think it’s a law for everybody. Especially as in our land, it’s the Constitution that is our governing authority. But I think it right to use the title “President,” especially when there are presidents that I would strongly disagree with. So for instance, over the past history I’ve talked about President Clinton, President Bush, President Obama and President Trump. I am not suggesting, again, that everybody must do this, but I’m suggesting that we need to find applications of ways we show honor and respect to the Office and those whom God has ordained to occupy that office.

If governing authorities are flawed and sometimes deeply flawed, why should we show this honor and respect? Here’s the foundation God lays for us in verses 1 and 2: **Every human authority has been instituted by God.** That’s the theological foundation.

***1*** *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.* ***2****Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*

God Himself is the Authority, capital “A,” behind the authorities, small “a.”We don’t submit to governing authorities because they earned our trust or earned our respect. We submit to governing authorities because God deserves our trust. God deserves our obedience. Our submission to governing authorities is a submission to God, Himself. It is a trust that God is working His will out in our lives through the governing authorities that He has instituted.A refusal to submit to our governing authorities is an indication that we don’t trust God and that we refuse to submit to His sovereign will in our lives.

God’s command for us to submit to human authorities is based upon the eternal truth that God is sovereign in the affairs of men. God is the one who establishes authority structures in this present world. Authority structures are not man-made. They are not devices to keep powerful people in powerful positions. Yes, authority structures have been abused by people in authority. God is never the author of evil that anyone does. God will hold them accountable. But God is the one who establishes authority structures and exercises His will through those authority structures. He is also the one who places specific people in those places of power. So here’s what Daniel says.

**Daniel 2:20-21** Daniel answered and said: “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings;”

You remember when narcissistic Pilate said to Jesus, “Why aren’t you answering me? You’re remaining silent.” Jesus was silent like a lamb before the shearers. He said, “Don’t you know that I have authority to release you or authority to crucify you?” Jesus calmly, but certainly said, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:10–11) He says, “Pilate, understand your position.” And those in authority need to understand their position, or else judgment is going to come. But we as believers recognize that God is the one who places even Pilate in this position for this season, for His sovereign purposes.

Why does God allow for wicked people to be placed in positions of authority? Again, this often perplexes us, to be sure. But here’s what we know. We know from Romans 8:28 that God works all things for the good of those who love Him. And God is moving all of human history toward a glorious end. And everything in that human history is for a display of His power, His goodness, His grace, and His beauty.

Now, there are four practical considerations in our submission to governing authorities. As we submit to the governing authorities, let’s think of these four things Paul draws out.

**1. We please God in our submission to Him.**

We please God when we submit to Him through our submission to human authority.

***2****Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed…*

That word “resist” is a strong word. It means to stand against. We say to God, “God, I will not present my body to You. I will not yield to You. I will not let you renew my mind,” when we refuse to place our lives underneath the human authority that He established. We resist Him. We’re refusing to worship Him. So Peter says

**1 Peter 2:13** Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution…

Our response to human authority is first and foremost a matter of worship. It’s a matter of presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. And then, as we do so, we find that God’s will is actually good, acceptable and perfect.

**2. We avoid the judgment of civil authorities.**

***2*** *…those who resist will incur judgment.* ***3*** *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,* ***4*** *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.*

So here, the role of government is explained. It’s a very limited role. Government is to be a terror to bad people who do bad things. Government is to be an encouragement to good people who do good things. In short, government is to promote the general welfare of its nation by encouraging actions that build up the community, and government is to restrain evil by punishing actions that tear apart the community.

Remember last week, we were told that we as people are not to take revenge. Don’t take revenge upon our enemies. If our enemy curses us, bless him. If he’s hungry, give him something to eat. If he’s thirsty, give him something to drink. This does not mean that God declares it open season upon His people for evil people to do anything they want without recourse. God sets human government in place to be His instrument of justice. God says, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay.” And one of the means God uses is human government. So if a neighbor burns down your garage intentionally and with malice, you don’t go over and burn down his fence. You don’t go over and punch him in the nose. What you do is you call up the governing authorities and you say this is what this person did. I’m going to entrust justice to you. That’s the proper response that God intends for us to have.

He goes on to say that the government does not bear the sword for nothing. Now, the sword, I believe, is to be the most extreme of punishments that human governments can levy. It’s capital punishment. It’s execution. That’s what the sword is symbolizing there. When government loses her will to punish evil doers, evil doers will multiply evil upon evil, creating horrendous suffering and misery in a nation.

So often, we look at government and we begin to complain and gripe and get troubled and frustrated. When was the last time you thanked God for human government and its blessing? All of us experience so much blessing because God has established human government to exercise authority. So for instance, though I’ve never had to use this service and I hope I never do, I’m thankful that I can call 911 and there are people that will come to my house to help me with whatever problem I’m having with other people or other evil doers. That system works. I am thankful that when I hear a plane flying overhead, I don’t fear that the plane is going to drop bombs on me because human government is in place to keep the enemies outside of our borders, to keep them outside so that they can’t create harm here. It is right for us to take time and say, “God, thank You for human government,” so that we would have a soft and joyful and grateful attitude toward this blessing from God.

**3. We support the general welfare of all people.**

I think Paul is getting to this in verse 8 when he says,

**Romans 13:8** Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Right on the heels of his instruction on our response to human government, he talks about our relationship. When we are good citizens, everyone in the community benefits. When we are bad citizens, we become a drain upon the entire community. So it’s right for us as Christians especially, to ask for the glory of God, “Is my community more at peace, better served, better funded, encouraged in righteousness, because I’m living in it?”For the Christian, we ought to be able to respond “Yes! That’s true that our community is better because I’m living here.” That’s God’s intention for us in our witness to the world.

**4. We strengthen a good and clear conscience.**

This is Paul’s point in verse 5.

***5*** *Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*

It’s not just to avoid punishment. That’s not the only reason why we obey the law. There are times when it’s likely that we could disobey the law and never suffer for it, never get caught. But he says it’s not just for that, but also for conscience sake. Conscience is the inner witness God places inside of us that either affirms our character, our integrity, or condemns it. A clear conscience is a precious treasure. Don’t throw it away.

I want to speak to young people in particular. A clear conscience, a conscience that is healthy, a conscience that is working, as opposed to a conscience that is hard, a conscience that is seared, is one of the most precious possessions a person can hold. The Apostle Paul says,

**1 Timothy 1:5** The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

So Paul takes that good conscience and lays it in value next to faith and next to purity of heart. This world is not a friend to our conscience and it will whisper a thousand ways in which it’s meaningless and harmless, to begin to poke holes or to inject little bits of poison into the conscience, to make it hardened or to make it seared. Protect your conscience, and especially in your response to human authority. And that authority could be in your home to parents, it could be in the classroom. That authority could be in church. That authority could be toward human government of various kinds. In those relationships, hold on to the precious value of a good conscience. It will serve you well. And as you grow older, especially toward the end of your life, you will find that there is nothing quite as precious as a conscience that is healthy and good.

When my brother was little, he got a new bicycle. It was rare. We didn’t get a lot of big gifts like that. It was kind of a once in a lifetime big gift. And I still remember that bicycle. It was purple. It had a banana seat. It had those big handlebars that had a stick shift. There were five gears. It was one of the coolest bikes I’d ever seen in my life, and my brother was just over the moon that he got this bike. He rode it every day for a week. At the end of the week though, he left that bike out in the front yard, and he woke up in the morning and it was gone. And it was gone, gone! It was never to be seen ever, ever again. So he had something that was of value, but he treated it carelessly. Even though my parents told him about this, “Don’t do this because there are people around that will steal it,” he didn’t take that seriously, and then it was gone. And it was too late. With your conscience, don’t leave it out in the front yard. There are influences that will steal it and take it. Guard it! Protect it! Paul says one way to do this is by having a proper heart toward authority, especially human government.

I want to close with a letter written in the 2nd Century by a Christian who wrote this beautiful description of how believers live in this present world. Remember, the main idea that we’re learning here is that our radical worship of God leads us to commit ourselves to be the very best of citizens here in this world. And here’s this anonymous Christian writing in the 2nd Century to defend Christianity. And this is what he writes about the community of faith. He says,

“For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe.”

In other words, Christians come from any country. They follow all kinds of customs. They speak all different languages.

“For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech.”

In other words, there are no Christian cities and there’s no Christian language. He says,

“But inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according to the lot of each of them has determined and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.”

In other words, you’re not going to be able to walk down the street and say, “There’s a Christian because they dress funny, or they have this haircut, or they only eat this food.” He says, no! They wear the same kind of clothes that everybody else in society wears. They eat the same food, etc.

“They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet suffer all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their babies.”

Did you catch that?

“They share their table with all, but not their bed with all. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their exemplary lives. They love all men and yet are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonored and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened unto life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks, yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. To sum it all up in one word—what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.”

I pray that this church would reflect that beauty. Then the Gospel would be made known to the praise of Jesus!