

In many ways we are privileged to live in this country.

There are many things we may not like; much we would change. But we still enjoy many freedoms that Christians in other countries do not.

We are in a unique and privileged position therefore to see the effects of both good and bad government on the life of our nation.

We are slowly beginning to wake up to the impact that current decisions being made by those in authority over us have on our freedoms as Christians in this land. The current 'Equality Bill' wending its way through parliament is a good example of this.

Looking more widely we see something of the global impact of the decisions made by those in authority here. For example, we currently have the 'Iraq Enquiry'; we still have our forces in Afghanistan related to what has become known as 'the global fight against terrorism'.

There is also a growing awareness of the impact that decisions can make on the environment and of course the effect that comes from our nation's response to things like world poverty.

In the passages of scripture we have read we consider our relationship as Christians to those in civil authority over us.

We will not attempt a comprehensive study of the subject, for our purpose this evening is to equip ourselves to pray for those in authority over us.

Looking at these scriptures for the first time one might be tempted to accuse Paul of being somewhat naïve. How can Christians submit to ungodly leaders? How can we influence things by praying? What about wicked regimes; surely you would view them very differently?

When Paul writes to the first century believers and encourages them both to submit too, and pray for, those in authority over them, the situation was very difficult for them.

Less than a decade prior to Paul writing to the church in Rome, Emperor Claudius had implemented a mass expulsion of Jews from the city, which had resulted in great suffering for these displaced people.

It was now only three years since the death of Claudius and the return of many of those Jews.

It would not surprise us if the believers that Paul is writing to resented Roman rule and were suspicious of it. I am sure we would have much sympathy with that view.

When Paul writes to Timothy in Ephesus a few years later, the dark clouds of persecution were once again gathering over the church.

Spreading rapidly out of Rome, Nero's hatred of Christians was biting and Paul was well aware that far more difficult times than had previously been known were in store for the church.

Again it would be of no surprise to us if they found it a struggle to pray for those who were openly hostile towards them; let alone submit to them.

Let us understand some key principles that come out of our readings that will help us to pray for those in authority.

I suggest that it is about getting the right perspective:

## 1. A right perspective on the Role of God

This is why we have read from Romans 13; even although that passage does not directly mention prayer.

*"...there is no authority except that which God has established"* (Rom 13v1).

The politicians may not acknowledge it but the confidence we have in praying for them is that of the Sovereignty of God. The Psalmist is clear on this in **Psalm 2:1-6**.

The Greek word for 'authority' in the middle of Romans 13:1 actually means 'delegated' authority.

It was a political term applied to a Roman Governor who ruled in place of the Emperor and by his authority. A New Testament example of this would be Pontius Pilate who represented the Roman Emperor.

So God delegates this civil authority as indeed Jesus points out to the aforementioned Pilate in **John 19:11**.

It is an important principle that the authority of the state is delegated, and therefore is not absolute power. God remains sovereign, even when the state does not acknowledge Him.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this in scripture is that found in Daniel, and the final acknowledgement of the pagan Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar after much struggling with the issue (**Dan 4:34b-35**).

If what Paul is saying in Romans is true then we see the first problem where government doesn't work as it should; i.e. a failure to recognise where their authority comes from.

*"...when the supremacy of God is recognised, every subordinate relationship is transformed and the performance of every duty is made noble."* (Wilson).

## 2. A right perspective on the Role of Authorities

This 'right perspective' is of course dependent on whether we firstly have the right perspective on the role of God.

Now we can go on to see how this translates into reality.

Those in authority are God's servants whether they like it or not.

Paul shows the Christians in Rome that the chief role of authorities is to maintain law and order (Rom 13v3-5). They are to meet the needs of a situation created by sin until Christ comes and evil is finally punished and righteousness rewarded.

We are in an 'in-between' time.

The reference in Romans 13:4 to 'bearing the sword' is a metaphor used to demonstrate the punishing of the wrongdoer. It was the symbol of a Roman magistrate's power to judge.

Of course, government is much more than law and order, but the principle is there nevertheless.

Human government has been entrusted by God and therefore it follows that it is God who sets the parameters within which this can and must be exercised.

Therefore, the state can only command obedience within the limits of the purposes for which it has been divinely instituted. Remember the words of the apostles to the Sanhedrin who had forbidden them to teach in Jesus name **Acts 5:29**.

God is still sovereign; ultimately we are all answerable to Him.

Paul instructs Timothy to encourage the believers to pray in an interesting way in 1 Tim 2:2. It is a prayer that the authorities might achieve conditions of peace and security so that they (the Christians) could pursue their lives in a godly way and in a way set apart for God (v2). This is done through the passing of good and just laws and wise government.

Now this prayer is neither a selfish one nor one that looks for a comfortable existence. If we are to live peaceful lives in godliness and holiness we need righteous government and righteous laws that produce the environment for such a life. When that is the case there are benefits to the whole nation and then as with ripples in a pond, benefits that go further afield as foreign policy is exercised in a moral and ethical way.

But notice in the next two verses (3-4) there is a further benefit to such a political environment. It is good, it pleases God...why? Because he wants men to be saved! **Ezekiel 33:11** is a very revealing verse about the heart of God for mankind. When Christians pray for civil rulers so that there is peace, it allows for the gospel to be preached and men to be saved.

### 3. A right perspective on the role of Christians

Paul's teaching here in 1 Timothy does not build in conditions that have to be met by government in order for Christians to pray.

We have already identified why we should pray for those in authority:

- a) Because God has placed them there
- b) Because it is good (v3), or morally right.
- c) Because it pleases God (v3). What higher reason do we need?
- d) Because God wants people to be saved! Isn't that our great desire?

#### **When we pray for those in authority over us...**

... it serves to remind us that they are under God's authority (Rom 13:1).

... we recognise the huge responsibility they have towards those they govern (Rom 13:4).

And so, in the context of prayer for everyone in verse 1, Paul sets out four different aspects of that praying:

- a) Requests: Personal prayers made on special occasions for particular needs.
- b) Prayers: Refers to all kinds of requests but mostly for general needs.
- c) Intercessions: Prayers offered on behalf of other people and their known needs.
- d) Thanksgiving: Prayers of gratitude for God's blessings and mercies. Whilst it may be true that some of the things that have been done or are being proposed are wrong or are not as we think they should be, our response is going to be a purely negative one unless we settle for this strong foundation of prayer.

#### **When praying for those in authority over us, pray for...**

##### Pray for:

- A recognition that authority is 'delegated authority' from God.
- An acknowledgement that they are God's servants.
- Government to be exercised justly.
- Righteous laws to be passed and those which are not to be prevented from becoming law.

- Laws that will retain the freedom to preach the gospel and to live the Biblically centred life.
- Christians in government and parliament that they will be able to serve with Biblical integrity.

### **When praying for particular individuals, pray for...**

- Wisdom in the decisions and challenges they face.
- Humility that will enable them to use their power not for their own gain but for the good of the people.
- Integrity; that quality of being honest and having strong moral principles.
- Commitment to do what is best for those they have authority over
- Contact with godly people who will be in their circle of influence.
- Salvation; that they will come to know Christ as Saviour and Lord.

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#### **MPs that represent the regular members of our congregation:**

**Richard Spring** (C) representing the constituency of West Suffolk

**James Paice** (C) representing the constituency of South East Cambridgeshire