

Sermon Title: A Terror to Bad Conduct
Biblical Text: Romans 13:2-4
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 13:2-4

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

When rapper JAY-Z was 24 or 25 he was driving south on the New Jersey turnpike. A police officer pulled him over. He records the incident in his iconic 2003 song, *99 Problems*. In it he lays out a clear picture of the tension many experience, when they encounter authority ...

*The year is '94, in my trunk is raw / In my rearview mirror is the m***' law. / Got two choices, y'all: pull over the car or / Bounce on the devil, put the pedal to the floor / And I ain't tryin' to see no highway chase with Jake / Plus I got a few dollars, I can fight the case / So I pull over to the side of the road / I heard, "Son, do you know why I'm stopping you for?" /*

'Cause I'm young and I'm black and my hat's real low? / Do I look like a mind reader, sir? I don't know / Am I under arrest or should I guess some mo? / "Well, you was doing fifty-five in a fifty-four / License and registration and step out of the car / Are you carrying a weapon on you? I know a lot of you are."

Regretfully, JAY's experience is not unique. Many identify with this song because they experience a similar tension, frustration, and fear when they encounter the police. And as we've been reminded all too often, this is particularly true in Black communities. Over and over we've seen Black people viewed and treated as threats while sleeping (Breonna Taylor), being in their own homes (Botham Jean), and even bird watching (Christian Cooper). In each of these (and countless other cases) Black image bearers were threatened with police force and even murdered.

I know. This idea and these stories are incredibly divisive. In his debut column for *The New York Times*, Iraqi war veteran David French references a Gallup survey about policing in American. He writes, "***In 2022, no institution (aside from the presidency) reflected a greater partisan trust gap than the police. A full 67 percent of Republicans expressed confidence in the police, versus only 28 percent of Democrats***" (*'Bad Apples' or Systemic Issues?*, February 5, 2023). And I assure you, this divide is no better amongst Christian. In fact, the gap is probably wider.

While our mixed emotions about police is unquestionably prevalent in our time, it's nothing new. American is not unique in her complex relationship with governing authorities and law enforcement. Imagine with me, Paul's original readership in Rome. They are all *new* Christians. They are ethnically and socially and financially diverse. They have varying religious backgrounds. Yet they are all citizens of a city ruled by an emperor who claimed to be god. Soon their brothers and sisters would be led by soldiers to arenas to be eaten alive as spectacle. Not only so, but about six or seven years after Paul wrote the letter, Rome burned to the ground and Emperor Nero blamed the Christians (64 AD).

Amidst the tension of our day and that of Paul's original audience, we come to a text which may seem even more upsetting than the previous. Paul tells us to not only not resist authorities but to "*be afraid*" ... because "*he does not bear the sword in vain*" (v.4). Scholar Esau McCaulley argues persuasively that Paul has in mind law enforcement or soldiers or police officers when he writes these instructions. After all, that's who he readers would face, those would be the ones carrying the swords. Paul even calls them, "*God's servants*" ... twice (vv.4a,4b). And so we need to consider how Christians should relate to police. That's what I'd like to talk about today. What's it look like to respect authority as God's servants.

He's how we'll navigate this text ...

- The *resistance* toward authority
- The *blessing* of authority
- The *servitude* of authority

[Pray]

Movement 1: The Resistance Toward Authority (v.2, Daniel 3:17-18)

Paul's been talking about authority. Specifically that governing authority has been instituted by God. Now he transitions with instruction about how we should live under this authority. *Read Romans 13:2 ... Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.* Notice, "*therefore*" ... it's a transitional term which weaves connective tissue between what's just been said and what's about to be said. In the previous verse Paul essentially says ... God ordains authority. But God does not endorse all forms of authority. Said differently, God shares his authority with human leaders but God always remains the ultimate authority. Humans authority is borrowed. That's true with things like money and ability and nature as much as it is with the institutions of family, government, and the Church. We are stewards. God is the owner.

Paul says now, *in light of that reality or therefore ... don't resist authorities*. He follows this command with adding a motivation ... *if you resist authority there will be consequence. You'll face judgment*. Like of all Paul's instructions in this portion of his letter, there's a reason ... he's responding to something. Namely, that we resist authority. Now, as we discussed last week, Paul is not endorsing all governing authority. Rather, he's laying out a standard. He's explaining a baseline idea and not commenting (at least not here) on exceptions to the rule. However, I think it will help us to understand him better if we reflect more on why we might resist authority and what type of resistance Paul is actually prohibiting.

Let's think about this ... *why do human beings resist authority?*

- We resist authority because we **despise** authority. When we experience the shadow side of authority, we're often compelled to throw the baby out with the bathwater. As it relates to modern police relations this often manifests in demands to do away with law enforcement completely. Of course, like any social idea, the "Defund the Police" movement is a spectrum. Some want to simply reallocate excessive spending on police to social development. Others want to completely abolish the police. Abolitionist educator and advocate Mariame Kaba points to places like Naperville where disproportionate money is used to fund community programs, rendering police presence unnecessary in some social settings. She told the Chicago Reader, *"People in Naperville are living abolition right now ... The cops*

are not in their schools, they're not on every street corner" (Police Abolitionists Find Fuel in the Protests, June 2020).

- We resist authority because we **desire** authority. More often perhaps, at the level of the heart, we're resistant to authority because we want to be in charge—whether of ourselves or in general. This desire is hard to nail down. But essentially we live in a time when we presume we belong to ourselves in the most extreme sense of the word. We don't want to be told what to do. As Professor Alan Noble explains, "*If I am my own and belong to myself, the first and most significant implication is that I am wholly responsible for my life*" (*You Are Not Your Own*, 19). That's what we want. Yet, he notes this is both exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. We long for an existence in which we are our own authority. But, like Jesus' disciples in Mark 10 ... we don't really know what we're asking (see Mark 10:38).
- We resist authority because we **disrespect** authority. Other times, we know the laws, we know who's in charge, we don't despise or desire authority, we just disobey authority. We break the law. And in so doing we disrespect those in positions of authority over us. It might be traffic laws. It might be tax laws. It might be drug law on the New Jersey turnpike. Whatever it is, sometimes we simply do not care what the law prescribes.

- We resist authority because we disagree with authority. Perhaps we don't want to be in charge nor want to get rid of authority or disobey it ... rather we've seen and experienced unclear, unjust, misguided, or unhelpful expressions of authority. We disagree. Maybe you resist certain legislations because you see the negative impact of those rules and leaders on your family, community, or God's vision for his world. A group of three Jewish statesmen were appointed over the affairs of Babylon (Daniel 3:12). Their governing authorities told them to worship the gods of Babylon or they'd be burned alive. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said to the king, ***Read Daniel 3:17-18 ... "If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up"***. They disagreed with authority.

I think Paul has in mind the first three. When he says we should not resist authority, we should not resist law enforcement ... he's saying we should not despise, desire, or disrespect authority. If and when we do, there will be judgment. *Why?* Because God has placed authority in our lives, even police officers for our good and his glory. Resisting them out of despisement, desire, and disrespect is resisting God himself. We can and should resist when we disagree. But even in our disagreement and our resistance may not always look like we expect of want.

Movement 2: The Blessing of Authority (vv.3-4, 1

Timothy 2:1-2)

Paul gives us a deeper motivation for not unrighteously resisting authority. *Read Romans 13:3 ... For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? God ordains authority. But God does not endorse all forms of authority.* God instituted governing authorities in general and law enforcement in particular to bring order. Or in the language Paul uses here, they bring order by being a *terror to bad conduct*. That's a blessing. That's the *blessing* of authority.

Governing authority which is reflective of God's character and purposes is good. It's good for us individually and as a society. A police force which staves off evil and approves righteousness is a grace. It's a way in which the wrath of God fosters a healthy fear which promotes the common good through justice, order, and safety of citizens. Notice how Paul continues, *Read Romans 13:3b-4 ... Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 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.* Our response, as citizens under the authority of law enforcement specifically and ruling authorities in general is to do good. Live within the rules. Vote. Pay taxes. Abide by traffic lights. In other words, Paul's point is that Christians should not be hard to govern. We should be a joy to lead. We should be good news in our neighborhoods. Our aldermanic authorities should be glad when they see

Christians on their weekly schedule because we live with humility, thoughtfulness, encouragement, and with respect.

In fact, the Scriptures point us beyond simply complying with the social order. Paul actually instructs his apprentice Timothy to pray for the good of governing authorities. *Read 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.* Christians should be a joy to govern. And we should pray for those in authority, praying for their blessing so that they will be a blessing to those in their charge. We are to do good under authority. We bless those in authority. This is not only how we demonstrate that God ordains authority, but also how we promote and manifest the type of authority that God endorses.

This biblical vision led Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to his commitment to nonviolence. He said, "*we adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself*" (*Noble Lecture, the University of Oslo*, December 11, 1964). In other words, the way we resist demonstrates the type of community we desire just as much as what we are resisting. We do good in the face of wrong.

However, when we don't do good under authority or bless those in authority, Pauls says there's a consequence. If we resist authority out of despisement, desire, and disrespect then we should expect just penalty. We should be afraid. That's what God has designed. That's what God desires. He has instituted and endorses

governing authorities which rule with righteous order. That's the idea of "bearing the sword." While some Bible readers find this as evidence for capital punishment, it's more a warning about how God's wrath works ... his wrath is often dispensed through human authorities. And so, you should not complain when you get a parking ticket if you didn't pay for parking. You should not get mad if you get caught texting and driving or drinking under age or breaking any other law. That's not corruption or mistreatment, that's consequence. Christians submit to fair consequence and don't despise justice.

Paul is talking about the norm. He's talking about the baseline and purpose behind why God has ordained. But let's be honest, this is not the norm in America. This is not the norm in many places around the world. And just because it could be worse, we shouldn't absolve our governing authorities from accountability. Too often law enforcement is a terror to good conduct, not evil. We might say the wrong people are afraid.

JAY-Z should not be upset if he gets caught with illegal drugs in the back of his car. But he should and we should disagree with the racial profiling that's going on and the systemic and economic disparities which often lead people in his position little choice. *Are you with me?*

And so, *what do we do when we disagree? How do we righteously resist? What's God's answer to unrighteous authority?*

Movement 3: The Servitude of Authority (Romans 13:3-4, 8:28, Revelation 19:9,11-16)

Two times in our passage Paul calls those who bear the sword, "*servants of God.*" Look again at vv.3-4. ***Read Romans 13:3-4 ... Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 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, the police are meant to accomplish God's purposes. Underneath his ultimate power and authority, police serve God. Even unwittingly because, as we learned earlier in Romans, ***Read Romans 8:28 ... And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*** God works in all things for good because he has authority over all things. Even the police.

And yet, police are fallible. They will not and do not always serve God's purposes of justice, safety, and order. Like every human being that doesn't perfectly fulfill God's design and desire for them. Therefore, like every fallen human being we should hold them accountable when they sin and treat them with dignity as image bearers always. But that's not all. Whenever someone or something does not fulfill God's design and desire, we should look to Jesus. Because ultimately, he fulfills all the promises and purposes of God. Jesus is the fullness of God's design for human flourishing. Jesus is the one who follows and fulfills all God's desires ... even as the one who governs and enforces God's righteousness.

You see, one day Jesus will bear a sword as the true and better servant of God. Listen to how John describes Christ's return and see if you can't see the fulfillment of justice and governing authorities. ***Read Revelation 19:11-16 ... Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.*** Jesus comes as one to enforce the law and righteousness and holiness of God. He comes with fire in his eyes. He comes to judge ... not just citizens, but nations with a sword that comes out of his mouth. He comes to rule as supreme authority *with a rod of iron*. He's thighs are tattooed with his authority, *King of kings and Lord of lords*.

On that day, if you've done good you have nothing to fear.

On that day, if you've done wrong you should be afraid.

He will only be a terror to bad conduct.

But John doesn't simply talk about Jesus as the *Rider on a White Horse* or the one who is called *Faithful and True*, who judges and makes war. Just before this

powerful scene of judgment we were at a wedding. *Read Revelation 19:9 ... And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."* The Bride is the Church. The Groom is Jesus. And by the blood of the Lamb, we are wed in eternal union. You see, before Jesus is the bearer of a sword who judges, he is the Lamb who dies. He resists unrighteous authority through sacrificial love. In other words, Jesus did not destroy Babylon or King Nebuchadnezzar that day those three Israelites were thrown into the fire ... but he did get into the fire with them (Daniel 3:25).

Jesus is our ultimate authority, our ultimate enforcer of the true ... who dies for love and dies for those whom he has authority over. This is why no human authority will ever satisfy, because no authority is that beautiful.

- *Why do you want to resist authority? Despise? Desire? Disrespect? Disagreement?*
- *How have you seen the enforcement of law as a blessing in your life?*
- *What's it look like to trust Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of order and righteousness and justice?*

In his book *Decoded*, JAY-Z explains that while the scene in *99 Problems* was based on a true experience, it was ultimately fictional. Yet the power of the story rings true to his listeners. Albeit in different ways. If you have a favorable view of the police, you hear that song and are immediately turned off by the fact that the

driver is trafficking cocaine. *He's wrong. He's resisting authority.* If you don't have a favorable view of the police, you are repulsed by the officer's racism. *He's wrong. He's a terror good conduct.* JAY says that dichotomy is intentional because that tension is real. He says that the song is "*about being stopped by the cops with a truck full of coke, but also about the larger presumption of guilt from the cradle that leads you to having the crack in your trunk in the first place*" (*Decoded*, 57).