

Romans (77)
Practical Words of Exhortation (Part 3)

We are working our way through this very practical series of commandments that the Lord has delivered to us, His people, through the hand of the Apostle Paul. These commandments reflect the kinds of attitudes and actions that should characterize how we live. We are to live this way because God of His own free and sovereign grace purposed to save us according to the riches of His grace. We obey these commandments, as the Lord enables us by His Holy Spirit, because we are Christians, ones who have been given salvation freely by our God.

Last Lord's Day we considered the sixth commandment in this list of seventeen. This is stated in Romans 12:12, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." We are to face the trials and difficulties knowing that we have hope based on the certain promises of God of eternal rest and innumerable blessings that await us. Being assured of God's promises, we are to face our trials in patient endurance through the means of prayer, asking our God to strengthen us and assist us. May our Lord enable us *to rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and constant in prayer.*

Let us now consider the next commandment before us in Romans 12:13.

7. "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." The first commandment in the list was in Romans 12:9, which reads, "Let love be genuine", or rather, "love without hypocrisy." How does one love without hypocrisy, or with sincerity? We are to have a *generous* love and that love is to be shown chiefly, but not exclusively, to providing for the needs of the Christian brethren who are unable to provide for themselves.

We read in the early chapters of the Book of Acts that this is what characterized the Christians who lived in the area of Jerusalem.

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32-37)

Here we read that in the early church, in the fresh flush of love that characterized the first Christians, there was an open heart toward one another. There was a sense of unity, mutual care, and concern among the Christian brothers and sisters. It could perhaps be argued that their willingness to sacrifice for one another in these magnanimous ways was due to their lack of understanding of what kind of life was before them, living as Christians in a fallen world. Perhaps many thought the Lord Jesus would return much sooner than later. But because their own future was "secure" and confirmed by the resurrection of the Lord, their attachment to this world and the things of this world had been curtailed, even severed.

It was not long, however, when there was difficulty in the manner that money, food, and goods were distributed among Christians. We read of this in Acts 6:1, "Now in those days, when *the number of the disciples* was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." The church solved this problem by the apostles ordaining seven men as "deacons" who supervised this ministry to assure that all were being regarded rightly and treated justly.

But aside from the problems that arose in the distribution of money, food, and clothing, the beautiful and gracious generosity of the early Christians toward one another was also marred through the sin of some within the ranks of professing Christians. We read of lying and hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1ff.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ²and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:1-11)

One reason that I brought this event before us is to underscore a principle that some seem to miss. There are those who read of the generosity and the free distribution of the money and goods of the early church and they claim that this shows that God endorses a liberal welfare state. Some would even read this passage and conclude, "I am in need and I have a right to some of yours!" This is a manifestation of the sin of covetousness; it is not a reflection of biblical teaching and practice. And if this covetous desire to take of what belongs to another is carried out, then the sin of thievery is committed. I heard recently a politician in Washington DC say that Jesus would have been a democrat and that He could not have possibly been a republican. I have heard it argued that the circumstances in the early church validate the principles of socialism, even communism. I would argue they do not, but rather they show just the opposite.¹ The passage before us in Acts 5 teaches us that people owned their own goods and property and that it was in their power to give or not to give. These things were not taken from some and given to others. These were voluntary gifts of the people that were freely distributed to others. Peter said to Ananias in verse 4, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?" The liberality of the early Christians was the willing donation of one's personal property to the needs of others. It was not the forceful taking from some of what is theirs and giving it to others. That is thievery, oppression, and tyranny. And to the degree that our government claims and assumes this authority to redistribute wealth, will be to the degree that the free citizens will have their liberty curtailed and their private lives controlled.

Our nation's founding fathers saw the role of government, particularly national government, as the greatest danger and threat to liberty that faced our nation. Our constitution was formulated to limit the authority of our national government in order to secure the possibility of retaining liberty in the future. The preamble to the constitution suggested this limitation of authority of the federal government. It reads:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

While the newly drafted constitution was to be ratified by the states, some believed that clearer statements about individual liberty needed to be established with more clear limitations stated regarding federal authority.

¹ I am mindful that several dozen pastors who may read these notes live in other nations which hold to different political philosophies than what I am espousing here. We each have had different experiences and have been taught different ways to view our world and the role of governments under which we live. I am attempting to describe here the political philosophy that once characterized the USA and is espoused by a minority of its citizens, a philosophy that we believe to reflect biblical precedent and principle illustrated and confirmed through the redemptive history recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

The Bill of Rights, ten in number, was drafted by James Madison. The tenth was of particular importance in this matter. It reads as follows:

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

Why am I bringing this matter up that may seem unattached with the subject and theme of our text? The reason is because the relationship between Christians and churches and the government under which they live is a difficult matter to sort out. But it is a very present issue and “problem” that we all have to address. It touches upon our daily lives. But further, I am attempting to lay a foundation for our consideration of what lies before us in about 9 verses from where are presently, when the apostle begins to address Christians’ responsibility to the secular “governing authorities.” And so, there are some abiding principles that touch upon these matters that need to be understood.

For example, the Scriptures reveal and teach that when people begin to look to their government rather than to God to lead them and provide for them, they fail to live before God which results in them forfeiting their liberty and they suffer the confiscation of their goods. This can be traced in the history of Israel. In the time of the Judges when God ruled over Israel as its King, the people increasingly and repeatedly had departed and defected from following their God and ordering their lives according to His commandments. The famous last verse of the Book of Judges reads, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” The people had learned through a repeated cycle of sin, loss of liberty, bondage to their enemies, and then experiencing deliverance when God set a “savior” a judge, that they were in need of a king to secure them in righteousness. The people were in need of a good and righteous king to rule over them and lead them in the ways of peace and righteousness. Their condition and problem was exacerbated, however, because the people did not want God to be king over them, rather, they wanted a king to rule over them, a king like the kings of the other nations of that region. When they had expressed their rejection of Samuel as their last judge, who had ruled over them on behalf of God their true king, we read of the interchange between Samuel and God. Here is 1 Samuel 8.

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ²The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. ³Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.”

⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD.

⁷And the LORD said to Samuel, “***Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.*** ⁸According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. ⁹Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. ¹¹He said, “***These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. ¹²And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.***”

¹⁹But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, ²⁰that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” ²¹And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. ²²And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.”

When government assumes the role that is rightfully God’s, that government will increasingly become oppressive toward its citizens. Corruption results from the power to tax for things other than the responsibility which God the Creator and Sovereign Ruler over history has ordained for secular governments. The power to legislate to take from some and give to others will be seen in those with power giving the wealth of some to those who will ensure or who will enhance their power.

Later, when the error of the people became evident, the prophet Samuel declared the will of God regarding these matters to his people. **1 Samuel 12:1ff** read as follows:

Now Samuel said to all Israel: “Indeed I have heeded your voice in all that you said to me, and have made a king over you. ²And now here is the king, walking before you; and I am old and grayheaded, and look, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my childhood to this day. ³Here I am. Witness against me before the LORD and before His anointed: Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand have I received any bribe with which to blind my eyes? I will restore it to you.”

⁴And they said, “You have not cheated us or oppressed us, nor have you taken anything from any man’s hand.”

⁵Then he said to them, “The LORD is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.”

And they answered, “He is witness.”

⁶Then Samuel said to the people, “It is the LORD who raised up Moses and Aaron, and who brought your fathers up from the land of Egypt. ⁷Now therefore, stand still, that I may reason with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous acts of the LORD which He did to you and your fathers: ⁸When Jacob had gone into Egypt, and your fathers cried out to the LORD, then the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place. ⁹And when they forgot the LORD their God, He sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. ¹⁰Then they cried out to the LORD, and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD and served the Baals and Ashtoreths; but now deliver us from the hand of our enemies, and we will serve You.’ ¹¹And the LORD sent Jerubbaal, Bedan, Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you dwelt in safety. ¹²And when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ when the LORD your God was your king.

¹³“Now therefore, here is the king whom you have chosen and whom you have desired. And take note, the LORD has set a king over you. ¹⁴If you fear the LORD and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the LORD your God. ¹⁵However, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you, as it was against your fathers.

¹⁶“Now therefore, stand and see this great thing which the LORD will do before your eyes: ¹⁷Is today not the wheat harvest? I will call to the LORD, and He will send thunder and rain, that you may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking a king for yourselves.”

¹⁸So Samuel called to the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

¹⁹And all the people said to Samuel, “Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of asking a king for ourselves.”

²⁰Then Samuel said to the people, “Do not fear. You have done all this wickedness; yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. ²¹And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing. ²²For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people...”

The result of this desire and action of Israel to desire a king like all the other nations was the very disappointing rule of Israel’s first king, King Saul. The end of his rule brought ruin and bondage to the people. The people did indeed need a king, but they were in need of a king who would lead them who had a heart for God, who would rule them on God’s behalf. This need was realized in a measure, of course, when God raised up King David, who ruled after King Saul. During his reign the people were secured in their liberty and security. They became prosperous and secure in their own land, each living safely on his family’s possession. Later the ideal existence would be articulated by one of the prophets—Micah. He foretold of the promised Kingdom of God ruled over by the Messiah, the Son of David.

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
²and many nations shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
³He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide for strong nations far away;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
⁴***but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,***
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
⁵For all the peoples walk
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God
forever and ever.
⁶In that day, declares the LORD,
I will assemble the lame
and gather those who have been driven away
and those whom I have afflicted;
⁷and the lame I will make the remnant,
and those who were cast off, a strong nation;
and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion
from this time forth and forevermore. (Micah 4:1-7)

It is this existence in the kingdom of God that we may enjoy within the life of Lord's church, which is reflected in the account of Acts 5, conditions which we will enjoy fully when our Lord returns and His kingdom is established fully.

The ideal political system that brings most benefit to the people is one in which individuals and families have their resources secure to them, in order that they may give to people in need of their own volition. In such social and political conditions people are blessed in giving to those in need and those who receive are blessed by the givers. The Lord uses this activity to knit the hearts and lives of His people together within a local church, or we might argue, with a local community. This is what is played out for us in Acts 4 and elsewhere.

What we see in Scripture are principles that **John Calvin** saw and instituted in the culture and economy of Geneva in the 16th century which later came to characterize British and American culture and society in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He instituted principles of *capitalism* and what came to be known as the *Protestant work ethic*. This was not the so-called "capitalism" of today, which has been rightly called crony capitalism, and I would argue could be called National Socialist (i.e. fascism). Rather what Calvin taught from the Scriptures is that all of life is spiritual and that work is wholesome and good and a just wage should be earned by the laborer. But our primary motivation for working and acquiring money and capital was so that we could serve others in love who live and work within our churches and communities. Is this not what Paul taught?

"Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need." (Eph. 4:28)

This is what our Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

¹⁹"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt. 6:19f)

Calvin emphasized that God should be glorified in our commerce and the use of our capital within our communities. Capital was to be acquired by the Christian, not to be hoarded to buy the best toys and to attain a false sense of security, as it is viewed in today's world, but rather capital was to be acquired to invest within one's community. In building business and providing goods and services for a fair exchange, one could be used by God to raise the quality of living for others in the community, first in the lives of one's own employees and then through one's products or services to the broader community. The liberality of bestowing one's goods to others was encouraged and commended, but it was done on a local level, in which there was accountability expected of those being assisted.

These principles are gleaned from the teaching of Scripture. For example, Paul told Timothy:

¹⁷Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. ¹⁸Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, ¹⁹storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. (1 Tim. 6:17-19)

And yet he could also say in **2 Thessalonians 3:6-15** that those who refuse to work should not be supported in their irresponsible ways.

⁶But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, ⁹not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. ¹⁰**For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.** ¹¹**For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.** ¹²Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.

¹³But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (2 Thess. 3:6-15)

Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ. (2 Thess. 3:5)