

Citizen's Charter

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[0 : 00] Brexit means Brexit. Make America great again. In these few words I've invoked maybe in your mind personalities and political movements that might either warm your heart or cause your blood to boil.

But I promise I won't mention president or prime minister again. But it shows to us that we live in a political world. We are constantly bombarded with politicians, politics, governments, laws, what it is that we are to do, what it is that we are to be.

And the question is, does God have something to tell us as citizens of this particular nation? Now if you're not from here, maybe you're visiting, take this as relevant to your own country, to your own government, to your own nation.

But as we turn to this passage, we realize that the apostle Paul is saying that the gospel impacts all aspects of our lives. And we'll see.

Because chapter 13, as you read it on its own, you kind of ask yourself, where does this come from? It kind of stands out. Why is it that Paul is kind of changing gears and now telling us about relationship of government and taxation and civil authorities?

[1 : 31] It seems kind of out of place in his 16 chapter treatise on the Christian faith. But what I'd like to notice with you first is that Christians, if you are a Christian here this morning, that we are renewed people whose relationships, all of our relationships are renewed and transformed relationships.

Now you might ask, well, where do you see that in the text? Well we don't see that in chapter 13 verses 1 to 7. But to understand the text, we have to appreciate the context in which it occurs.

And sometimes these big numbers that you see in your Bible, the 13, the 14, the 15, the 16, the chapter divisions are not all that helpful because those big numbers, it seems to us, separate these particular ideas and thoughts and we're inclined to think, okay, new chapter, new idea.

But actually to understand chapter 13, 1 to 7, we need to turn back a page to chapter 12 because in chapter 12, the apostle Paul says this.

He says, 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.

[2 : 55] So God is something to say about our bodies, our lives. But then he goes on to say, 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.

So the renewed mind will prompt and produce renewed relationships, transformed relationships. And it's interesting that God begins with the mind.

He begins with the inside. He changes our hearts and he changes our minds so that he changes our lives. And that change of life is seen or should be seen in every sphere of life.

Last night as I was preparing this message, one of my students contacted me and recommended that I read a book that he found to be particularly helpful.

And the title of the book was How to Think. And I thought, well, at least he feels that there's still hope for me, that I still have maybe the capacity to learn how to do that after 52 years.

[4 : 08] But I thought that that title was quite telling and quite helpful because the Bible teaches us how to think and in teaching us how to think informs us how to live.

Remember the command of Jesus when he preached the gospel? He said, repent and believe the good news. Repent means a change of mind. And the apostle Paul here is telling us that the gospel brings about a transformation of mind.

Several centuries ago, one of the most famous preachers, John Wesley, he summarized the Christian message under two headings, which I find very helpful.

He said, if any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two, the doctrine of justification and that of the new birth, the former relating to that great work which God does for us in forgiving our sins, the latter to the great work which God does in us in renewing our fallen nature.

So what Wesley is saying is that the gospel presents to us Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ crucified on the cross, bearing the penalty and the weight of sin, paying the price, satisfying the debt.

[5 : 30] That the gospel presents to us Jesus Christ buried in the tomb, the gospel presents Jesus raised from the dead, ascended on high and seated at the right hand of the majesty.

But the gospel also presents to us this, this picture of transformation on the part of the believer. So it's not just what we look at Jesus, but what we begin then to experience within ourselves.

So the work of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit renewing, invigorating, enlivening. And that's why Jesus said, you must be born again. We need a completely new start.

We need a completely new heart. We need a completely new mind. And the apostle Paul tells us that we are no longer to be conformed to this world, the standard of this world, the priorities of this world, the goals, the desires, the motivations of this world are no longer our desires, goals and motivations.

The standard by which this world is judged is not the standard by which the people of God are judged. Why? Because our minds are transformed and renewed.

[6 : 44] Then in chapter 12, the apostle addresses four spheres of transformation. So first and foremost, we are renewed in our relationship with God, no longer conformed to the world, but transformed by God by the renewing of our minds.

Paul goes on in verses three to eight to say that the Christian has a renewed view of himself or herself. We now see ourselves as God wants us to see ourselves.

So look at verse three in chapter 12, for by the grace given me, I say to everyone among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think. So by the power of the Spirit working within you, you see yourself in the way that God wants you to see you.

But this reminds us that you and I are not balanced people. We are not balanced in our understanding of God. We're not balanced in our understanding of ourselves.

We so often get it wrong, but we get it wrong in different ways. Both Martin Luther and John Newton use this illustration. They described humanity, of which we are all a member of that particular race, that humanity is like a drunk man on a horse.

[8 : 00] He falls off on one side. He's placed back on the horse and then he goes and falls off on the other side. So when you think of yourselves, there'll be some people here who think too highly.

Maybe culturally, that's one challenge that me and my compatriots may have as a nation, that Americans tend temperamentally to be quite confident and outgoing.

So the apostle Paul says, don't think too highly of yourself. But there are others who fall off on the other side of the horse and you'll think too lowly of yourself. I can't do that.

I can't do anything. I'm not good at speaking. I'm not good at serving. But what a transformed mind will say that you think of yourselves as God wants you to think, that you'll see your own gifts, your own abilities, and you will see those as the gift that God has given to you.

Paul goes on to say that our transformed mind and our transformed lives express themselves in transformed relationships among one another.

[9 : 08] Verses 9 to 13, let love be genuine and abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love what another with brotherly affection.

So just as we gaze on Jesus' crucified, buried, risen, ascended, and seated, we also recognize the power of the Spirit, transforming our relationship with God, transforming our understanding of ourselves, and transforming our relationships with each other.

What we once were, we no longer are. And this is the testimony, the ongoing testimony of the Christian. How is it that we treat one another? How is it that we encourage one another?

How is it that we build one another up? Because that is a powerful persuasive testimony that says to the world out there, this group, these people, us, there's something different about them.

There's something different about how they live, and there's something different about how they treat one another. And Paul goes on in the fourth category, or the fourth relationship at the very end of Romans chapter 12, and he says that the renewal of the mind and the transformation of the life will find expression even in how the believer engages with the persecutor, the enemy, the opponent, the difficult person.

[10 : 33] Paul is saying your relationship with Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwelling within you, finds an expression in every aspect of your life, with God, within yourself, among the people of God, and even when you encounter the enemy.

We now then come to the context of Romans 13, where Paul says that the renewed mind and the transformed life finds expression in the life of the citizen.

You and I are citizens. If you're a Christian here today, you are a citizen of heaven. That's why Bill read earlier today, Philippians chapter 3, but our citizenship is in heaven.

We await the return of Jesus. He will set all things right. He will restore all that is broken. He will renew and transform. But we are all also citizens here.

You may be citizens of the United Kingdom. You may be citizens of another nation, but at least for this time and for this opportunity, you are in the city of Edinburgh, you are in the United Kingdom, so you're a citizen.

[11 : 41] But what kind of citizen are you to be? How does the transformed mind in the renewed life find its expression in your life or in my life?

Well, the Apostle Paul in chapter 13 tells us first and foremost that every government and every government authority and every individual is established and instituted by God.

He makes it quite clear. This refrain is often repeated and emphasized so that in these short, the short compass of verses, the Apostle Paul is saying to this young Christian community, they are young in faith and they are finding themselves there at the center of the Roman Empire, at the center of the Empire's government.

So it's maybe not surprising that the Apostle spends time explaining to them how they engage with the authorities, the government, Caesar, his officials, etc.

So God establishes the government. You should also note that God will ultimately hold all to account.

[13 : 01] That includes us here. One day you and I will stand before God to give an account. You will give your account and I will give my account.

But so too will every authority, every king, every queen, every president, every prime minister, every authority will ultimately stand before the ultimate authority.

So you see, the Bible presents God as the one with all power and with all authority and the one to whom all humanity will ultimately be accountable.

But Paul says that the established authorities that we see and engage with are those that God himself has established. Now does that imply that these governments, that these officials, that these institutions are by definition godly?

Are they good? Because if God has established them, does that then mean that they exercise godly leadership, that they demonstrate godly values?

[14 : 07] Well I think the history of humanity, our own present day, will say no. That human government established by God, but expressed or carried out by human agency, we see very much the human condition writ large.

When you look at our authorities, when you look at our rulers and our kings and our prime ministers and our presidents, you see the foibles and the failings and the limitations of humanity so clearly.

Now does that then mean that we can dismiss such authorities? This authority, this government is ungodly. This authority is not good therefore as a citizen I can step back.

I can withdraw. I can disengage. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

The apostle Paul is not speaking about some golden age that has never existed. He's speaking about a real place at a real time, real authority, real government that are not godly in their actions but are god appointed.

[15 : 25] So he's saying to this young Christian community, let everyone be subject. Now the apostle Paul is a master at the use of language.

He could have used the word obey. Obey is a stronger word than be subject, both imply a level of obedience but obey is a command that is most closely associated with God.

We have an absolute commitment and we have an absolute responsibility to obey God, to obey the gospel, to obey Jesus Christ.

But the word used here is a word that is slightly less strong but nonetheless implies a clear submission to the governing authorities.

So you and I as citizens of this country or whatever country you're a citizen of, you are to be subject to those ruling authorities.

[16 : 28] Now I know what you're thinking and I too think these things. What about? When we reel off the exceptions, we reel off the circumstances, we ask ourselves, well, what if you were living in, Edia means Uganda, what if you were living in Paul Potts, Cambodia, what if you were living in Adolf Hitler's Germany?

We'll get to those exceptions in a moment. But the governing principle the apostle Paul gives clearly, the people subject to the government.

As an expression of this transformed, this renewed mind, this transformed life. So you see the connection here, relationship with God, relationship within ourselves, relationships among the people of God, relationships with the enemy, with the persecutor, and relationship with our governing authorities.

Every sphere of life is governed by God and every sphere of life is informed by the transforming, renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

Now this morning, if you're here and you're not yet a Christian, maybe you're new to the Christian message or maybe you're not yet persuaded of the validity or the authority of God and of the gospel, much of what has preceded and much of that which follows may seem to you to be completely irrelevant.

[18 : 02] But make sure that you understand that this word is not my word, nor is it the word of a man, the apostle Paul, though he's an instrument obviously in God's hand.

But when you have heard the Bible which you have, you've heard the very voice of God and God is speaking with absolute power, with absolute authority, whether you acknowledge him or not and whether you believe in him or not, whether you accept that this is his word or not, in the sound of God's voice this morning, he will hold you to account based upon what you have heard, based upon what you have experienced and he's speaking to you now.

So he's calling you into this personal relationship. He's reminding you of who he is, he's reminding you of what he has done and he's also reminding you that one day you and I will meet with him face to face.

We will meet with him the ultimate of all authorities, just as we engage with authorities here on earth and we are to fear their wrath when we do wrong and we are to do good to receive their approbation.

If you do not obey this authority, ultimate authority, you will stand in his presence subject to his wrath. So remember whether you believe, whether you don't believe, the authority of God and the responsibility that you have to him remains unchanged.

[19 : 34] So all government is instituted by God. Does that mean that governments are godlier good? No. Winston Churchill put it this way.

He said, many forms of government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

So the apostle Paul is not commending the empire. He's not commending the system of Caesar and the Roman authorities and the Roman system of civil servant, but he is saying that this is the government that God has installed and you and I as subjects to that government owe that government obedience.

Paul goes on to say that government is instituted by God for our good. If you ever survey the history of the 20th and 21st century, some of the most terrifying situations are where anarchy reigns, where the rule of law and the rule of government for a time is absent.

A hundred days in Rwanda led to almost a million people slaughtered. The rule of law was largely absent.

[21 : 00] So God establishes governments for the good of the people. He wants to promote good and he wants to punish evil and he places these responsibilities in the hands of government and government officials.

So verse two, the warning in verse two, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will encourage judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct.

So as a Christian, a renewed and transformed person, you and I should be the living example of a good subject to the Queen, a good citizen of this nation.

Why? Because if we do good, we have nothing to fear. It's only for the evil doer, for the transgressor. Now many Sunday mornings I would be coming from prison where I serve and I work and I would be speaking there the gospel to those who have transgressed.

They have broken the law. They have experienced their day in court. They've appeared before a magistrate, a sheriff or a judge and they are now paying the price for that transgression, that sin, that breach of the law.

[22 : 24] So Paul says not only is the government established by God, but the government is there to do two things. It's there to promote good and it's there to punish evil. Does it do that perfectly?

No. Because the instruments of any government are human instruments and not one human instrument is perfect. Not one of us is perfect. When we exercise authority and if you do exercise authority, so if you're here this morning and you have a position of authority, maybe you are in government or maybe you are in a position of authority in business or in an organization where you work, you are responsible for promoting what is good and for condemning what is wrong.

And that position of responsibility you should take very seriously because you've been placed there by God and he expects you to do those two things. Promote good and condemn evil.

Now of course it's never done perfectly, but it's there meant for our good because the servant we're told in verse four, then do what is good and you will receive his approval.

For he, the servant 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 and a Avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

[23 : 55] The government bears the sword, the government has the power to punish and the power to condemn and the power to commend and to reward that which is good.

But I also want you to notice here that the renewed follower of Jesus Christ, if you're a Christian that's you, has a renewed and transformed relationship with the government and with its society.

One of the most important pieces of history, one of the most important, it's a very long historical study, was written by Edward Gibbon, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

And Gibbon described the first couple centuries of that empire and was trying to explain why it was that in the midst of persecution and in the midst of opposition that this new religious group called Christianity not only took root but spread.

And he put it this way. He said, but the primitive Christian demonstrated his faith by his virtues and it was very justly supposed that the divine persuasion which enlightened or subdued the understanding must at the same time purify the heart and direct the actions of the believer.

[25 : 17] He went on to say, he said, I will mention two motives which might naturally render the lives of primitive Christians much purer and more austere than those of their pagan contemporaries or of their degenerate successors.

Repentance for their past sins and the laudable desire of supporting the reputation of the society in which they were engaged. Now Edward Gibbon was not a Christian.

Edward Gibbon was not a fan of Christianity, quite the opposite. But as a historian he had to accept that there was something about this new Christian community that was different.

They lived different lives. Their marriages were different. Their family life was different. But also their relationship to their society was different. They were different than the pagans.

They were different than the Roman citizens. They lived lives that commended the faith that they held. So you see, Gibbon is not just answering the question, what did the Christian community look like?

[26 : 27] He's asking, answering the question, why did this primitive faith spread? Remember because the Christian faith had the ability of offending everyone.

To the Jew it was a stumbling block. To the Greek it was utterly foolishness. And yet Christianity took root. It took root in Rome. That's why Paul's writing to the Roman Christian.

It took root throughout the whole of the Roman Empire. Jewish people became Christians. Pagan people became Christians. Roman citizens became Christians. And one of the driving factors was this, the quality and the character of the Christian lives.

They lived different lives. They were better husbands, better wives. They were better citizens. And that witness was a transformative and was a declarative evidence of the power of the gospel.

So you have the privilege of having two ministers here. You've got Derek and you've got Thomas. And week by week they will preach and they will teach. And they will proclaim the gospel. And in a sense they are an obvious instrument of the gospel here.

[27 : 37] You'll hear the sermons. You'll be spurred on. You'll be built up. If you're not a Christian you'll hear the gospel and by the power of God you'll maybe transformed to a follower of Jesus.

But two people can only do the work of two people. The challenge that Romans 13 gives is that you now become instruments of the gospel wherever you go.

Your place of work, your place of study, your home, your community, the people you engage with and one characteristic of that transformed life is what kind of citizen are you of this city?

What kind of citizen are you of this nation? Do you benefit the wider community? Do you benefit the wider society?

Jeremiah, when he was speaking to an exiled community, remember? The community was now in Babylon. They were far from home. And how do you engage in a foreign country?

[28 : 39] How do you engage in a hostile country? How do you engage among people who don't share your faith and in fact condemn your faith or in fact ridicule your faith?

Jeremiah 29 says this, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says to those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and settle down.

Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they too may have sons and daughters.

Increase in number there. Do not decrease. Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Jeremiah is saying the same thing as the apostle Paul. You're strangers in a strange land. Pray for that strange land. Pray for those strange people and be citizens of that land that commend the faith that you believe.

[29 : 45] Would it be easy to be a Christian in Idiomines? Uganda absolutely not. Paul Potts, Cambodia, Adolf Hitler's, Germany absolutely not. Let me tell you, it was no picnic being a believer in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.

Ask Daniel, ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but these men lived lives of quality. They lived lives of integrity and they were rewarded with positions of authority.

Yes, they faced persecution. Yes, they faced opposition. Yes, they were at the point of death, but nonetheless they were citizens of integrity. They honored the authorities insofar as they could honor the authorities.

This brings us to the exceptions, of course, that as a follower of Jesus, as a believer in God, your ultimate authority and your ultimate accountability is to God.

There does come a point where the government may command you to do that which God forbids. If the government commands and God forbids, you hear the injunction of God and you must disobey the command of the government.

[30 : 59] And likewise, if the government forbids that which God requires, you heed the voice of God and you do what he requires even if the government condemns or restricts.

In 1946, many of the high officials of the Third Reich appeared at Nuremberg and they gave their defense, which was summed up an order is an order.

I was just following orders. I did what I was told to do. I was a good citizen. My commanding officer, my senior official told me to do this and I did it.

Or I am not culpable. I am not responsible. Most of those defendants at Nuremberg were either executed or received life imprisonment because they were culpable and they were accountable.

They did what they should not have done. They did what God commanded not to be done. So ultimately, you and I stand accountable to God. There may be a point.

[32 : 12] We may encounter that point in the near future where we must say no because we are citizens of heaven. Even though the government of this land says yes or vice versa, we might say yes when the government of this land says no.

Why? Because our citizenship and our accountability is to God. But first and foremost, we hear the voice of God, we hear the word of God, and we need to maintain this godly and wise balance.

The apostle Paul brings his argument to a conclusion on the subject that not one of us likes, taxes.

At the end of the section that we're looking on, he says, for because of this, you also pay taxes. So it's not just an abstract relationship with a governing authority.

There's an actual cost. Now for many years, I've been in this country almost 30 years and for probably the first 20 years of my time here, I heard about council tax, but I never paid council tax.

[33 : 26] I was in the enviable position for many years. I was a student. I was exempt from council tax. I was a minister and my congregation kindly paid my council tax for me. I realize now that that's not everybody's experience.

But then when I got my new job, I realized I had to register with the council and I actually had to pay this tax. Now naturally, I wasn't that excited to pay the council tax.

I thought to myself, that's a lot of money. Every month, why should I pay that? Then I thought to myself, well, I kind of like my garbage being collected.

I kind of appreciate that. Having running water, that's a nice perk. So I kind of like that. So I'm part of the city.

I get the benefits of being part of the city of Edinburgh and the city of Edinburgh has decreed that there is such a thing as a council tax. They say, this is the property you live in and this is the band that you're at, so you pay the council tax.

[34 : 24] Now as a citizen of Edinburgh, but also as a citizen of heaven, I recognize the authority of God. I recognize the authority of the city council. I pay my tax.

You should pay your tax. You're a citizen here. You have a property. If you're not exempt, you pay your council tax. You pay your PAYE. You pay your income tax. Why you're a citizen?

It costs money. It costs money to defend you. It costs money to sweep the streets. It costs money to educate kids. You get the idea. But I'd like to close with the words of someone that you cannot contravene.

You might find the teaching of Paul challenging or difficult. You might find my explanation or my presentation adequate or inadequate. But let's give the founder of our faith the final word.

That's a good place to end, isn't it? Let's hear what Jesus has to say about this subject because if anyone can speak with power and with authority and with clarity and with balance, it's him.

[35 : 29] Remember that scene in Matthew 22. When the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words, they sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.

Teacher they said, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others because you pay no attention to who they are.

Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, you hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?

Show me the coin used for paying the tax. They brought him a denarius and he asked them, whose image is this and whose inscription?

Others they replied. Then he said to them, so give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. When they heard this, they were amazed.

[36 : 31] So they left him and went away. The Holy Spirit is at work in your life where you hear and heed the word of Jesus. You honor him, you glorify him.

And when he says you render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, you do so. When he says you give to God what belongs to God, you do so. And the power of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit is such that the work of the gospel becomes multiplied by you so that when you go to your work tomorrow morning, when you go to your place of study, when you go into this community, into this society, you go there as a representative of Jesus Christ and you can represent him well or you can represent him poorly.

As a good citizen, you represent him well. And as you represent him well, others may begin to ask the question, what is it about this group?

What is it about these Christians? I don't understand what they believe but I see that they live differently. Their lives, their families, their own communities and their input into society is for good.

You are you a godly citizen of this land. Do you honor the authorities and above all, do you honor the one who establishes those authorities?

[37 : 57] You render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, render to God what belongs to God, you heed the voice of Jesus and you represent Jesus well in this culture and in this society.

May God bless His word to each of us. Let us pray. Father, I thank you both for your word for its challenge that you are teaching us and instructing us.

You are instructing us in the reality of life. You are not presenting to us a situation that is perfect or ideal but is real and genuine. And you are saying to each one of us to live lives of quality, to live lives of integrity, to represent you well and to commend the gospel by the quality and the character of each of our lives.

Father, let's be honest. We cannot do this. We cannot produce this. We cannot achieve this. Our strength is weak.

Our consistency is non-existent. We need you every step of the way. We need your power because we're weak. We need your wisdom because we're foolish.

[39 : 04] We need your consistency because we are so inconsistent. So we ask, Lord, to work in us, that you would work through us, that you would enlighten us, that we would see, that you would enliven us, that we would live, that you would invigorate and empower us that we can be.

The men and the women, the husbands, the wives, the sons, the children, the citizens, the rulers that you have called us to be, enable us to be people of integrity, that the gospel permeates every aspect of our lives, that you get the glory, you get the praise, and that others might marvel at the great God that we worship and the great God of Jesus, whom we confess, because it's in His name we pray.

Amen.