

# *“Love Fulfills the Law”*

*Fifth Sunday after Pentecost*

*I Samuel 17:32-49; Romans 13:1-10; Mark 4:35-41*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 7, June 24, 2018, dedicated to all the children at southern border of the United States who have been taken from their parents by the United States government and to their parents, to our new members who joined today, to Jude Gelfius on his baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

*“Love Fulfills the Law” \**

*I Samuel 17:32-49; Romans 13:1-10; Mark 4:35-41*

For the last three weeks, The Trump Administration’s decision to separate thousands of children from their asylum-seeking parents at the border has brought mounting horror across the United States. Among the surprising objectors are an increasingly vocal coalition of [conservative religious leaders](#), including some who have generally been very friendly to the President.

On Tuesday, June 12, the Southern Baptist Convention [overwhelmingly passed](#) a resolution calling for immigration reform that maintains “the priority of family unity.” On Wednesday, June 13, American Catholic bishops [denounced](#) Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ approach to asylum, framing it as a “right to life” issue. And most surprising of all, was

evangelical Franklin Graham, a very vocal Trump supporter, saying, *“I think it’s disgraceful, it’s terrible to see families ripped apart. I don’t support it one bit,”* He said this while speaking on Pat Robertson’s ultra-conservative Christian Broadcasting Network.

In response to all this, Attorney General Sessions pushed back in a [speech](#) to a small audience in Fort Wayne, Indiana on Thursday, June 14. He did so with an extraordinary defense. A defense used often by slaveowners and slavery supporters in 1840’s and 1850’s. It was a defense used in Nazi Germany by Adolph Hitler and his “German Christian pastors” when supporting the genocide of the Jews.

Jeff Sessions said, The Bible supports the Trump administration’s approach to immigration enforcement.

*“Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes.”* His comment was followed on that same day, Thursday afternoon, as the White House echoed Sessions’ argument. CNN reporter Jim Acosta asked White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders what part of the Bible says it’s moral to separate children and their mothers. *“It is very biblical to enforce the*

law,” she [replied](#). “That is actually repeated a number of times throughout the Bible.”

Upon returning to the United States from Costa Rica, I stepped into this firestorm. So, I altered my sermon on Mark 4:35-41, “Calm in Stormy Times,” to offer a few reflections on Romans 13 and its use and abuse through the ages. Romans 13:1-8 have proven to be among the most volatile and misused passages of New Testament. I feel it worth pausing to read more deeply into the Apostle Paul’s words....

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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On a good day, Romans 13:1-7 is a controversial passage. It is frequently included in lists of “tough passages” with which Christians grapple. The [specific verses](#) to which Jeff Sessions referred come from Romans 13:1-3:

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended.*

The minute Jeff Sessions spoke, he displayed that he didn't understand the passage or Paul. (And actually, as I watched him, he stumbled through his words... perhaps knowing he was in dangerous territory). As Sunday School teacher in the United Methodist Church, he knew better. The problem for Sessions is that the historical situation in which Paul wrote his [letter to the Romans](#) does far more to undermine his policy than to support it.

Although the actual date and origin of the letter is not totally certain, most [scholars think](#) it was sent to the Christian community in Rome around 55AD. This was a few years after the Roman Emperor Claudius exiled Rome's Jewish community in 49AD. That Jewish community included many people who had become Christians and were connected to other Christians in Rome. As you know, Paul himself was a Jew who had become a Christian. After his conversion he began travelling around the Mediterranean, starting Christian communities, and instructing them how to live.

Shortly before Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome, many of the Jewish people who had been forced to leave Rome began to return, the city now safe for them again after the death of Claudius. Paul wrote the letter in part because he was worried that things would go badly when the Jews and the Jewish Christians tried to reintegrate with the non-Jewish Christians in Rome. Paul feared their earlier exile by the emperor would keep them from being welcomed back.

Paul spends so much time in his letter discussing the way Jews and non-Jews should live with one another (see, for example, chapters 2–4, 9–11 and 14) is because he is deeply concerned about welcoming the migrants to Rome. He argues that the Romans should openly welcome those Jewish members who had been forcibly removed some time ago; the church should

return them to their places within the community and honor them. Perhaps these people were not completely unknown to the Christians left in Rome, but they were returning after a long absence. They were, for all intents and purposes, immigrants entering a host community that wasn't sure it could trust them and probably didn't want them around.

**Paul is vehement about one thing that those who remained in Rome SHOULD NOT DO.** They SHOULD NOT conclude they were any better or different than these Jewish migrants. That is why Paul famously says that “ALL” – Romans and Jews – “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Paul  [marvels that](#)  anyone would “pass judgement on your brother or sister” (14.10), for “each of us will be accountable to God” (14.12).

This particular point makes Romans an even worse defense of the policy Sessions is pursuing. Just a few verses before the line Sessions recently quoted from Romans 13, Paul wrote in Romans 12:20, “*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on his head.*”

And just a few lines after requiring respect for the government, Paul sums up his point by encouraging the audience to: *“Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”* Paul’s familiar language about loving one’s neighbor – like Jesus of Nazareth before him – alludes to [Leviticus 19](#), verse 18. While few people today know the content of Leviticus 19, Christian and Jewish audiences in the first century AD would have known it. That text also commands people to create a system of economic care for migrants from potentially dangerous foreign countries at their own financial expense: *“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field ... Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.”*

The command to love a foreigner and to let them freely gather food that belongs to you puts us a long, long way from Sessions’ arguments about obeying governments to ensure safety for Americans. The logic of Paul’s words might have sounded helpful to Sessions in isolation, but the letter they come from undermines nearly everything Sessions wants them to support.

Romans 13 has a long history as a battering ram against civil disobedience or resistance to the government in any way, shape or form. At the time of the American Revolution,

Romans 13 was [hotly debated](#) when some pastors withdrew from revolt because they believed Romans 13 mandated it. They felt they would defy God if they defied the King. But, American Patriots who rejected Paul's mandate to obey the government and pastors who preached against the King were jailed and tried for treason.

In a study of how the Bible was used in the American Revolution, the historian James Byrd [argues](#) that "American patriots" fought against the notion that Romans 13 required unconditional obedience. Instead, he wrote, they preached from the text "*to deny that Paul gave kings the right to be tyrants.*" As the Anglican priest and regimental chaplain Fr. David Griffith [said](#) in a sermon on Romans 13, Paul "*never meant ... to give sanction to the crimes of wicked and despotic men.*"

The Protestant clergy who favored the American Revolution were heirs to an interpretation of Romans 13 that went back to the Reformation. Reformation theologians often used Romans 13 to bolster support for law and order, most notoriously [when Martin Luther](#) justified the violent suppression of a peasant uprising with Romans 13 (Quoting Luther on this was something Hitler's theologians loved to do). However, the side was also true. In a long [exposition](#) of the passage, Reformed theologian (one of our early and

influential theologians) John Calvin argued that *all* the powers that be were ordained by God, including not just the king but also all the lesser magistrates. Those lower ranked officials were expected to resist kings “when they tyrannize and insult over the humbler of the people,” and Calvin listed the people in the Bible who had resisted “slavish obedience to the depraved wishes” of lawfully constituted authority.

Where Loyalists invoked the law-and-order interpretation of Romans 13, Patriot clergy argued that only JUST authorities were to be obeyed. Is it possible that our nation was born 242 years ago in direct violation of Jeff Sessions’ interpretation of Romans 13? It’s not only possible - It is what happened.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defenders of slavery [argued](#) that Romans 13 mandated obedience to the Fugitive Slave Act. Many anti-slavery activists, by contrast, held that the moral law God had ordained took precedence over the government leaders he had ordained. So, without threatening to dissolve the union, they refused to participate in bringing “the fugitive slave back to the master and the bondage” and were willing to “suffer the penalty” for civil disobedience rather than “commit the crime” of helping to re-enslave a person.

One Vermont author, for example, [argued that](#) the United States, “*with its enslavement of the Africans and its extermination of the Indians,*” stood outside Paul’s command to obedience. (Oh yes, Romans 13 was also used against Native people in the genocide our government conducted in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century). Romans 13 was used and abused by pastors and elected officials at all levels of government in run-up to the Civil War. Romans 13 was regularly preached by white pastors to slaves. Slave owners also trained and forced Black enslaved preachers (under the threat of death – themselves or their families) to deliver the message to their own people and would stand watch in the churches to make sure they delivered the right message of subjugation. Hitler’s pastors developed entire teachings around Romans 13:1-7 and White Christians in apartheid South Africa frequently [used it](#) to defend the status quo.

In our current times, the passage has proved irresistible to Christians with an interest in promoting deference to the state. Last year, Trump-supporting pastor the Rev. Robert Jeffress [used the passage](#) to justify why he believes the president has the authority to “take out” Kim Jong Un. The Rev. Ralph Drollinger, who [leads a Bible study](#) for Cabinet members including Jeff Sessions, published a [Bible study in 2016](#) that used the passage to bolster an argument that national borders

and boundaries are part of God's design. Drollinger pointed out that Romans 13:4—which refers to rulers as “agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”—is [popular among police officers](#) because it strengthens them in their stopping wrongdoers on the streets.

Despite its frequent misuse, the passage is an important source of Christian political theology, according to Matthew Arbo, director of the Center for Faith and Public Life at Oklahoma Baptist University. Arbo points out that the passage places God as the appointer of authorities, but not the appointer of specific laws. *“One is not obligated to respect any and everything an authority orders simply because an authority orders it,”* he said. *“If the authority commands what is evil, then naturally no one should uphold it, Christian included.”*

As St. Augustine put it in the fourth century, echoing Paul: *“An unjust law is no law at all.”*

Romans 13 goes on to command the early church to *“Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”* But what if you don't “owe authorities honor and respect” because of their mistreatment of others? If there is no honor and respect for citizens and the sojourners in our land, then resistance is called for. This is where civil disobedience

and martyrdom has always come to play a role in our Christian story. This is where dying for allegiance to Jesus Christ leads us to stand with the oppressed and abused in our world.

In this present moment, those who are resisting the Administration and challenging the given policies and practices being delivered by Sessions and the Justice Department are doing so for real and pertinent and Biblically based reasons. When speaking 10 days ago, Jeff Sessions omitted some crucial context that would have tempered his biblical justification for, say, [removing a nursing baby from its mother's breast](#). Or taking children from parents with the lie that they were “getting a bath” and then not returning them. Or warehousing children and teens by separating them from their families who together had fled from starvation, terror and poverty to come to our land of opportunity and hope. Following the injunction to not comfort the children while they are being imprisoned is also damaging. The traumatic damage done to children when removing them from their parents at such an early age is real. It is provable. It is long lasting. It causes psychological and emotional damages for a lifetime.

Beyond, the current misuse of Romans 13, every single person of faith has a deeper and more frequent biblical injunction to follow – to care for strangers and the poor. “*When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong,*” the book of Leviticus commands. In the New Testament, Jesus himself says that God’s eternal judgment will rest in part on whether one has “[welcomed the stranger.](#)” It’s even right there in Romans 13, just a few verses after the ones Sessions favors: “**Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.**”

God is love. Love fulfills the law. So, let us be Lovers. Let us fulfill the real and everlasting law of God- to love one another. Amen.

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- *Evidence and material from this sermon was drawn from many sources. They have not all been cited by letter and verse.*

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