

Introduction

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy spoke these celebrated words: **"I do not believe any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation . . . And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."** He was right in that first line he spoke. We live in the best place, the U.S.A., at the best time, the 21st century, in all of human history. He was also right in the second line he spoke. We should desire and seek our country's good over our good. We should put what we can do for it before what it can do for us. That's what we should do and our text explains why and how we should.

Government Is God's

We begin with the word **"governing"** in verse 1. It identifies what Paul's writing about, government. He himself lived under an autocratic form of government. As a practical matter, one man, the Roman emperor, wielded all the political power. But there are many other forms of government including monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, theocracy, parliamentary, and republic to name a few. Our own United States government is a particular type of republic, a constitutional republic.

Notice what Paul writes about government in verse 1. It's **"from God, established by God."** It's a God-made not man-made institution. He conceived and founded it. Government, in other words, is God-ordained. In that regard, He doesn't endorse any one form of government over another in the Bible. That doesn't mean though that all are equally pleasing to Him because they aren't. Some achieve His purposes (justice and peace) better than others do.

Our United States government is one of those. Consider just one of the remarkable features of our Constitution. It doesn't assure citizen freedoms by meticulously enumerating rights, as the South African Constitution and the Canadian Charter of Rights or Freedoms do, for

instance. It chooses instead to assure freedoms by limiting the power of government, which is ultimately a far better approach. I don't know if the United States Constitution is the best that *will be* achieved. But it's my firm opinion that it's the best that *has been* achieved. It's a work of genius that takes the realities of natural law and man's fallenness into account. In my view, our constitutional republic achieves God's purposes for government (justice and peace) better than any other form does.

Nonetheless, God ordains all governments and the word "**authority**" in verses 1 and 2 implies what that means. To have authority means to have the right to control, command, or determine. According to verses 1 and 2, God gives government just that, the right to control, to command, or to determine things for citizens. In 1919, for instance, the United States Government prohibited citizens from manufacturing, selling, or transporting "**intoxicating liquors.**" Immediately, the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave it the right to do that. Ultimately, God gave it the right to do that.

The moral is that God ordains government. He gives it authority over its citizens.

Government's Purpose

Paul explains why He does in verse 4. Government is "**a minister of God to you for good.**" Its ministry, according to verses 3 and 4, is a limited one – to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. Plainly put, God ordains it to create "**law and order.**"

Government is God's response to man's fallen nature. St. Augustine explained it well in his classic work *The City of God*. Government is a necessary evil. Corrupt government is better than no government at all because of man's sinful nature. Clearly, it can't redeem people, but it can restrain the evil they do. It can't transform their character, but it can, to an extent, control their behavior. People commonly criticize laws, saying "**You can't legislate morality.**" But that isn't what government intends laws to do. It doesn't use them to make citizens "**be moral.**" It

uses them to make citizens **“act morally.”**

Referring to state government, suppose Ohio repealed Ohio Revised Code (O.R.C.) Section 4511.2 so that it's no longer a crime to run red lights and stop signs. Stopping is purely voluntary. Would you and I be as safe or less safe on our streets? There's no doubt about it. We'd be less safe. Or suppose it repealed O.R.C. Section 2911.12 so that it's no longer a crime to take property from homes and stores without consent. Not doing so is purely voluntary. Would our property be as safe or less safe? There's no doubt about it. It'd be less safe. You get my point. God gives our Ohio government and all governments the authority to create order by restraining citizens from doing evil.

Paul explains His ultimate aim in doing so in 1 Timothy 2:1-2. It's that you and I **“may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.”** Or as he says it in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, it's that we can **“lead a quiet life and attend to our own business and work with our hands.”** C.S. Lewis said it differently but the meaning is the same. It's that we might have the simple freedom to enjoy a cup of tea by the fire with our family. He was right. Government's role is to restrain evil so that we can live peaceful, stable, and godly lives.

Government's Means for Achieving Its Purpose

That's its role and in verse 4, Paul reveals the God-given means for carrying it out. Government is **“an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.”** This verse gives it divine authority to establish criminal laws and to punish those who break them.

So, Ohio establishes a law that prohibits the use of unapproved drugs. It also punishes those who break that law for the first time with a fine of up to \$2,500 and/or imprisonment for 6 to 12 months. Many individuals and groups view drug users as victims and sympathize with them. The state, however, views them as criminals and punishes them.

It does so rightly because that's the means God gives government to restrain evil. Note the strong language Paul uses about that in verse 4.

Government “**does not bear the sword for nothing.**” It has divine authority to restrain evil by punishing evildoers.

God’s Servants

To this point, we’ve examined what Paul says about government. Now let’s examine what he says about those who comprise it – what he calls “**rulers**” in verse 3 and “**authorities**” in verse 6. Those terms refer to individuals who hold governmental offices. In the first century Roman Empire they included the Emperor, consuls, Senators, and provincial governors to name a few. In 21st century America, they include federal officials like the President, Congressmen, and Senators; state officials like Governors and Lt. Governors; and local officials like mayors and councilmen to name a few.

Now, in verse 6, Paul reveals the most significant insight about governmental officials that we’ll ever learn. They’re “**public servants.**” That means they hold their offices to “**serve**” the public – to promote the good of citizens. The problem is many aren’t public servants as much as they are self-servants. They promote their good over the public’s good.

Consider an observation that five-term United States Senator Barry Goldwater made in his autobiography. When he entered the Senate in 1953, almost all Senators adhered to this order of priority in carrying out their duties: the good of the nation, the good of my state, and last, the good of my career. But by 1988 when he wrote his autobiography, he observed that the order of priority of most Senators was reversed: the good of my career, the good of my state, and last, the good of the nation. The fact is that many if not most office holders today are self-servants more than they are public servants.

But they shouldn’t be. Notice a critical point about governmental officials in verse 6. They aren’t just “**public servants.**” They’re “**God’s public servants.**” Whether they realize it or not or like it or not, they are, before they’re anything else, servants of God. They hold their offices to achieve His purpose, which is the good of the public. They’re

public servants, in other words, because they're first of all *divine* servants. And if they aren't serving the public as they should, they aren't serving God as they should. And if they aren't serving God as they should, He'll judge them accordingly, with a greater condemnation.

Because they're God's servants, we should honor governmental officials (verse 7). We respect their offices even if we oppose them. We should also pray for them (1 Timothy 2:1-2). We ask God to give to them and to do for them what they need in their political and personal lives.

What We Can Do for Our Country

We now know what our government should do for us. But in verse 7, Paul also teaches us what we should do for it. "**Render**" to it what is "**due**" it. That means we obey its laws, orders, and regulations, verse 5. We also give it what it requires to exist and to serve well, verse 6. In our constitutional republic, what it requires is citizen participation in the political process. So, depending on the circumstances before us, we lobby, protest, practice civil disobedience, write our political leaders, run for office, persuade, and vote intelligently. Those things comprise the "**what you can do for your country**" of which John F. Kennedy spoke.

But there are two more things we must also do.

First, we commit ourselves to personal sanity. To be sane means to be in touch with reality. We routinely grasp what is true and best. It's easy to see how that relates to nations. Citizen sanity cultivates justice and peace. Citizen insanity cultivates injustice and turmoil.

Anti-slavery activism and egalitarianism in 19th century America illustrates what I mean. Sane people who grasped the truth, God created all human beings equal, were at the very core of that.

There's a second thing we can and must do for America. Commit ourselves to personal character development. To have good character means two things. First, we do the good that we don't desire to do and don't do the evil we desire to do. And second, better yet, we desire to do good and do it and don't desire to do evil and don't do it. That's good

character and the well-being of this great nation of ours depends on it being largely achieved among the masses. The chief architect of our United States Constitution, James Madison, grasped just that. He wrote: **“We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments of God.”** For society to function well, people’s wrong desires and the vices to which they lead have to be restrained. If the people themselves don’t restrain them, then government will – by taking away their liberties.

Those then are two things that can and must do for America. Commit ourselves to personal sanity and character development. That’s what we need to do and Paul reveals how we do it in the verses that follow our text, 8-14. He summarizes those verses this way in verse 14, **“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”** To put on Jesus means two things.

First, we arrange our affairs around learning all that He says. Jesus is perfect sanity and thus, so is what He says. To learn what He says, therefore, makes us sane. We come to know what is true and best.

To put on Jesus means a second thing. We arrange our affairs around acting upon Him and interacting with Him. He in turn acts upon us and interacts with us so that we become like Him. We take on His character in other words. We routinely desire to do what is good and do it and desire not to do what is evil and don’t do it.

Conclusion

I’d sum it up this way in closing. Become a disciple of Jesus and make disciples of Jesus. That’s the first and best thing you can do for your country.