

Subjective Readings

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I used to say that I never want to get political in church because the combination of religion with politics has been at the root of lots and lots of problems, not only in American history but in human history. It doesn't seem to go well. But what I've come to see, especially over the last several years of being here at Artisan and learning from you and from colleagues, is that the Gospel of Jesus is inherently political on one level. That bringing it to bear in our world in what the Greeks would have called our *polis* (the city) makes it political. And that means that if you're concerned with bringing the gospel to bear in the world, it's not as easy as just avoiding politics like you might at a polite dinner party or something like that. The church is not a polite place all the time.

So now what I've taken to saying, and I hope that this will reassure those of you who are going, "Oh *no!*" [laughter] is that I never want to be partisan in church. I realize that what I really object to is the idea that a pastor or a church or a denomination would turn out to be little more than a mouthpiece or a bully for one of the political parties. And you can go to most churches in America and figure out which party they're the mouthpiece for because they never seem to stray from the party line, whichever one it might be. And in my opinion, that's an indication that they are subjects not to the Gospel but to a political worldview. So do you see the difference between how you have to engage in politics if you want to bring the gospel into the "polis," and on the other hand, you have to believe a certain set of political things in order to be part of a certain church? I want no part of that second one but I want to try hard at making the first one the reality for us. And of course, the line between being political and being partisan can be blurry, and what I see as the line not might not be what you see as the line. So you might think that I cross the line sometimes or that I don't get close enough to it and I might think the same thing about you. And because of that and because I'm a person who generally doesn't like conflict very much and who generally wants to be an agent of unity and making us one and wants us to be in harmony with each other, I still kind of prefer not to talk about political stuff if given the choice. But I don't have the choice this week. This is one of those

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weeks where I need to set aside the sermon that I had prepared and use this time to respond in a Gospel way to what has happened in the news. And it's kind of a shame because I never really write sermons very far in advance. But because I had the annual meeting this week and the leadership retreat the weekend before, I wrote the sermon like two weeks ago. It's amazing I'm way more prepped than usual. And honestly I kind of liked it, but here's what I figured out. I haven't yet found coverage for one of the weeks that I'm on vacation this summer so I'm going to sit in my office and preach this old sermon into a camera [laughs] and you'll get to hear it when I'm on vacation. It might be a little bit weird to have my head floating up there like something from "1984" [crowd laughs] but that's way we're going to get around it.

So a summary of what I'm talking about if you haven't heard. The major news story this week has been that as a matter of immigration policy, the U.S. government has been separating families who are seeking asylum in the U.S. by crossing the border illegally, and sometimes separating families who are trying to enter the U.S. through the legal method through approved points of entry. And I'm going to try to describe the situation in a way that's sensitive to all the people who are in the room right now, which means I can't be quite as worked up about some of the details; I can't show that to you right now. So this is been going on for a while now but has been dramatically stepped up in the last probably two months, during which time approximately two thousand children have been separated from their families. There are lots and lots of details about this story which I think if we were trying to engage it in the format of a political debate would be important to keep in mind. But I want to leave it mostly there by way of details right now.

Suffice it to say that this is a deeply, deeply troubling practice even when you take into account the fact that not every image that's been shared on social media is entirely honest and what it's representing itself to be. Even when you take into account the fact that the previous administration was not exactly a paragon of compassion when it came to questions of immigration. This one right now, perpetrated by this particular stage of our U.S. government and this particular administration, is deeply troubling. It's absolutely inconsistent with the overwhelming message throughout Scripture, both the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures, where it is absolutely clear that we should welcome the stranger, that we should show mercy to those who are in need and that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. So people of faith ought to condemn this policy in the strongest possible terms. And I do now if you haven't heard me say it yet. [Person in crowd says "Amen."]. Thank you. And surprisingly, that actually happened this week. People of faith from across the religious spectrum, from across the political spectrum, condemned this policy. We never get like an entire one hundred percent agreement about anything, but this is about as close as I've seen in a long long time. Everything from the farthest left, like Unitarian or like Reformed Jewish or like very mainline Protestant, all

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the way to the very far right have condemned this policy. This is as much as I'll say about specific names, but when Franklin Graham stands up to the president of the United States when he has or when they have an "R" after his name you know that there is something significant happening. So I don't want to go all *Upworthy* on you [pauses; crowd laughs] but you won't believe what happened next. Did I hear a click?

In all seriousness, it's actually what happened next that I want to focus on a little bit more this morning. The real reason that I felt I couldn't go forward with my lectionary based sermon today is that I need to respond specifically to how the Bible has been used by politicians this week. Particularly politicians who are advocating for this administration's policy on immigration and family separation. This to me has been gravely concerning. The policy itself is gravely concerning, but I think we all agree about that. The use of Scripture has been extremely troubling to me because I'm a person who loves the Bible (and) I'm a person who thinks of the Bible as inspired and authoritative. I'm a person whose life's work is wrapped up in teaching people about the Bible and how to read it and how to love it and how to use it as a guide for your life. And for your understanding of who God is and how we ought to live in the world and how we have to bring the gospel to bear in the *polis*. That's my that's my career, that's what I care most about day to day. And when that starts getting abused and leveraged in the ways that it was abused and leveraged this week, I become very, very upset. I'm not a person who shows a lot of emotion typically when I preach, but I'm very upset, just trust me. Very, very troubled when political leaders use the Bible to suggest that the church — the Body of *Christ* — should never question their actions and policies.

See, my job, I think, when I engage Scripture on Sunday mornings and in Bible studies and throughout the week is not so much always to tell you what the Bible says or means or what you should do with it. I do that sometimes. I think that's like a more prophetic side of preaching and that's appropriate. It's not my job to tell you what to think or how to bring the gospel to bear in your political engagement. It's my job to teach you how to read the Bible, how to apply it and to inspire in you, if I can, a love for Scripture that makes you *want* to do those things. That makes you *want* to engage it and understand it and apply it. And that's why when the Bible jumps into the public sphere in a way that I frankly find not only disturbing but bordering on blasphemous, I will speak up. So if you'd like to turn with me in your Bible to Romans 13 (in the red Bibles on page 923). If you own a Bible I do encourage you to bring it with you on Sundays and make it part of your practice of hearing the word taught and proclaimed at Artisan so that it gets connected to your personal life when you're reading the Bible on your own. If you don't own a Bible please take one of these red ones with you, write your name in it so that we know it's not one of the few Bibles if we find it, although they do all look the same. But we want you to have a Bible. If you're digital you can find it there as well. This is the passage of Scripture

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that was referred to by the attorney general this past week when faith leaders started to challenge the policies of the administration. When that happened, this was the response, to refer to this passage of Romans 13. And I'm reading verses one through seven:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there's no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good and you will receive its approval for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong you should be afraid for the authority does not bear the sword in vain. It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes for the authorities are God's servants busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

Let's stop right there for a minute. By the way, this image behind the text on the screen today — these are rosaries that were confiscated by Border Patrol agents, considered to be potentially lethal objects. So you cannot read Romans 13 in a vacuum. You can't actually read any Scripture in a vacuum. I know it's easier to do that, but you can't. I know it's nice to have something like a page a day, a verse a day calendar or something where you have a little piece of Scripture that gets beamed to you and that's all you engage with. Listen, that's better than not reading any Scripture at all in some ways. In some ways it's worse, but it's better in some ways. Like remember when we talked about the sabbath we talked about how you have to modify or your efforts to do the exercise or you'll never get anywhere? But it can't be enough, that's not enough. You cannot read these things in a vacuum. You can't just read those seven verses and go, “Well, anything the government says is what I have to do!” Let me tell you why. When you read Scripture you have to be considering a lot of factors. This is the teaching you how to read the Bible part, by the way.

Let me give you a few factors that you should be considering whenever you undertake a serious study of Scripture. First thing; where does this verse or passage that I'm reading fit in the flow of the book that I'm reading? Where does this passage, in this case Romans 13 one through seven, which if you can see my fingers it's maybe two inches of text, where does that fit into the flow of the entire book of Romans in this case? I don't know if you know anything about the book of Romans but it's long and it's complex. If you want to start with that exercise you may be thinking, “I can't read the whole book of Romans just to read those seven verses. What am I

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supposed to do?” Start with what comes either right before it or right after it. I don't know, maybe let's try what's right after it today [crowd laughs]. Romans 13, starting in verse eight:

“Owe no one anything except to love one another for the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law. The commandments (you should not commit adultery, murder, should not steal, you shall not covet) and any other commandment are summed up in this word; love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Does that give you a little bit of context to help with Romans 13 one through seven as we try to apply it this week? That's just the first step. Honestly I don't want to get too deep-dive in how to read the Bible, but honestly you can go to Wikipedia and they will have an outline of every book in the Bible. It's not perfect but it's a starting point so you can see, here's what the Apostle Paul, the author of the book of Romans, seems to be trying to do in this book. I wonder what this little two inches of text has to do with that bigger purpose. If you have a study Bible there's probably an outline at the start of the study Bible. Yes, all of those things are influenced by the biases of the people who wrote them, but if you're trying to get a sense of it it's a place to start. Next step; where does the book that I'm reading fit into the flow of the entirety of Scripture? “What, I have to understand the whole thing?” [laughter]. Well, like not not before you get dessert today. But yes, that should be your aim if you want to be a serious student of Scripture. If you want to apply the words of the Bible to the world around you. Yes, you have to know what the Bible is there for. You have to know what it's trying to do, you have to know how it's constructed and how it's not a book but a library. And when and where and why each of those books was written, and what the one you're studying right now has to do with the rest of it. Where does it fit into the big metanarrative, to use a fancy postmodern word.

I'm not saying that you have to be an expert but I'm saying that you have to be curious, and you have to be a lifelong learner. Listen, I don't have every single answer to all these questions that you can get a little bit closer every day, you can learn a little bit more. So let's give let's give you one example. What's the book right before Romans? Let's go to Acts. What's your favorite number? Five? Okay, we'll go to Acts chapter 5 [laughter]. How many varieties of Smucker's Jam are there? Twenty seven? Okay, 5:27. It turns out right here in this passage, strangely enough, that some of the apostles have been arrested:

“And when they brought them, they had them stand before the council and the high priests questioned them saying, ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name (meaning the name of Jesus) yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.’ But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God

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rather than any human authority.” [laughter; Voice of Pastor Scott]. Did someone gasp? Do you remember the story of the Hebrew midwives, what the Pharaoh tried to do to do to control the Israelite population? Let's not speak of it in too much detail right now, but the Hebrew midwives disobeyed the pharaoh and they nursed those children out of the womb and into life. They did not submit to the governing authorities when the governing authorities told them to do something that was contrary to the will of God in the world, which they understood from their relationship with God, from their conscience which Paul does mention in Romans 13:6, I think.

So you see where this text verse or passage fits in the book that you're reading, where that book itself fits in the bigger picture of the Bible, and you have to hold these things in tension. Sometimes it seems like they're they're mutually exclusive, they're incompatible (and) you've got to do some work. Other things you might think about are history, culture. “Oh no, now I have to go to the library!” What was going on in the Roman era at the time when Paul wrote the book of Romans and said this thing to them? That might be good to know if you want to understand why he might have said it. And then you might consider some some basic historical facts. Let me give you an example. If I was doing this on Twitter I'd put the clapping emoji between every word [laughter]. Should I do that? I think that might be cultural appropriation, I'm not sure. But Paul was arrested many times by the Romans. Half of the New Testament was written from prison. Also once again I'll be short on details here, but multiple post-biblical historical sources tell us that Paul's life ended when the Roman Empire decided that he was insubordinate. Remember the ghost in Harry Potter? Okay, that's what happened to Paul [laughter]. Now I don't mean that he haunted Gryffindor House [laughter]. I mean like... [to self] Do not ad lib about Harry Potter.

Here's the point. If you want to argue that, according to Romans, what Paul believed based on Romans 13 was that you that every Christian should obey every law in every circumstance no matter what, you have your work cut out for you. It does not follow from the facts, does not follow from what the apostles did, it doesn't follow what happened to Paul in the Bible and outside the Bible. See also every single one of Jesus's apostles, the 11 that remained after the resurrection except for John who died of old age or possibly a bad acid trip while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. That's how you get the book of Revelation by the way [laughter]. Not to mention there's one other person in the Bible I'm struggling to think...who was it? He ran afoul of the authorities [pause]. Oh, it was Jesus. If you remember my squirrel joke about how in Sunday School the answer is always Jesus, that's the punchline. So it's Sunday School and the teacher's asking the kids a little warm up question like, “Okay kids, what's something that's grey and fuzzy and small has a bushy tail and it likes to climb trees and eat nuts?” And one of the kids goes, “I know the answer is Jesus but it sure sounds like a squirrel” [laughter]. The answer

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is always Jesus, and now whenever you see a squirrel you're going to think of Jesus, which is actually pretty awesome.

By the way, bonus point for trying to understand Scripture. How has this passage been used and interpreted and applied throughout the history of the church? Now I'm really asking you to dig deep. This is a very specific thing that you'd have to do some research on. But do you want to know what the Bible means or not? One of Artisan's foundational values is roots. It says, "We are deeply rooted in the historic Christian faith as revealed in Scripture and," that little word *and* is a very important part of what makes us unique, "lived out, worked out in the life of God's people through the ages." It's important for you to know what other people of faith have done with this text for good and for bad. And let me tell you what some other people of faith have done with this Romans 13 text. They've used it to tell people during the slavery era of the United States that they should obey the Fugitive Slave Act, which required any good citizen to capture a slave who had fled their master and return them. That was the law of the land and when abolitionists began to object to it, guess what chapter of the Bible got trotted out. Romans 13. See also, Jim Crow. See also, apartheid. See also, and I know I'm going to break one of the internet nerd laws here, but the Holocaust. Like what is it, Godwin's Law, that if you start to invoke Hitler or the Holocaust you've lost the argument. But in this case it's true the Nazis used Roman 13 in the course of the Holocaust. So what I'm telling you is that we should be extremely worried when a politician or elected official starts using Holy Scripture to demand unflinching obedience and allegiance to the government because Jesus's kingdom is not of this world, as he told the Roman authorities when they had him under arrest. And getting in bed with the Empire has never served the church well and it never will.

So what are we to do? We have these texts, we want to be obedient to them. We're one of those churches that wants to be obedient to the Bible. You read Romans 13 and you want to make sense of it (and) you want to obey it to the extent that it's appropriate to do so. How do you know? The answer is Jesus. I'm teasing, but I'm not kidding. The first thing that you do with a difficult Bible passages is to read it through the lens of Christ — a Christo-centric lens. If you see everything in the Bible through what you know of Jesus (yes, I realize that you get most of what you know about Jesus from the Bible) but Jesus reveals God's nature perfectly where nothing else in the world or in history ever has, including the law and the prophets. That's what the author of the book of Hebrews told us. And what Jesus taught in part and in whole was the great commandment. You remember the story. Someone came to Jesus and said, "What's the most important law?" And Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind, and strength and the second one is like it." And then he digs back all the way into Leviticus 19, he's going way into the archives to say the second law is to love your neighbor as yourself. And then he said all the law, all the prophets, everything that's been revealed in Scripture hangs on

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these two. Well, I take that to mean is that if someone's interpreting a part of Scripture in a way that doesn't demonstrate and activate love of God and love of neighbor then they are not obeying Scripture. They are breaking the law, if you will, because Jesus tells us that's the fruit. By the way, when when he was asked to define, "Who is my neighbor?" he told the story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan, racially other. The outcast. The "less than" person was the only one who cared for a person who was in need. The priest walked by, the Levite walked by, and the Samaritan stopped and helped at great cost himself. And Jesus said that's the one who acted like a neighbor, and that's what it means to love your neighbor.

So how do you apply Romans 13 when it comes to the question of immigration policy? Well, thankfully I don't have to set immigration policy. But as a person of faith and as a faith leader if I could be so bold, I will respond when someone uses Romans 13 to suggest that people should be subject to a law that violates the love of neighbor in such an egregious way. So if you're wondering if as a Christian who's obedient to Scripture, including Romans 13, if it's okay for you to call your senator or representative or your other elected officials, if it's okay for you to attend a protest with a sign that's strongly worded, if it's okay for you to get into a discussion with someone where you speak boldly as a person of faith on behalf of those who are in need. The answer to all those things is yes, it's okay to do that and you should do that. I don't think our salvation is going to be found in the machinery of U.S. politics. I've somewhat given up hope on its ability to do anything well sometimes. It doesn't mean you stop trying. And then, the other way that Jesus is the answer is that we all need to get up close. We all need to lean on Jesus with the fullest of the fullness of our weight. We all need to absorb the grace and mercy of the Savior of the world for our own mistakes, for our own interactions with others that sometimes have fractured our relationships, and for the wisdom to know when to disobey the ruling authorities and for the courage to do it.

And so this this communion table is the table not of the church but of the Lord, of Jesus himself, that is to be made ready for those who love him, for those who want to love him more. So come you who have much faith and you who have little. You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time. You who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come Democrats, come Republicans. Come sinners, come saints. Come all, come not because it is I who invite you but because it is our Lord. It is His will that those who want him irrespective of their political beliefs of whether they're right or wrong, of whether they have done well or done poorly, that they should meet Him here. I'll remind you that if you'd like to receive prayer from a member of our prayer team that will happen at the back of the room during this time. Our musicians will come forward will continue to sing while we take communion. Our table is

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open, come and receive the grace and mercy found here in the presence of Jesus and his body and in his blood made be food for your souls and unity for our spirits.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com