

On December 17, 2010, a young Tunisian named Mohammed Bouazizi walked up to a local government building and set himself on fire.

Earlier that day, the police had confiscated his pushcart for selling vegetables, again. When he tried to pay the fine to get it back, the officer slapped him around, spat in his face, and insulted his dead father.

Having silently endured such humiliations and injustice for years, Bouazizi decided it was time to speak up.

So he went to the local government office to file a complaint.

Unfortunately, he received about the same treatment from the local authorities as he had from the police.

This was one injustice too many.

An hour later he returned to the government building, doused his body with fuel, and set himself on ablaze. He died a few weeks later.

But when Bouazizi struck that match, it wasn't just himself he was setting on fire, it was the nation itself.

People took to the streets in protest, and within weeks the dictatorial government of Tunisia had toppled.

And it didn't end there.

Sparks from that revolutionary fire drifted eastward, and soon there were flames in the streets of Cairo, and that government came down as well.

When we turn on the television we are bombarded with protests, people are struggling with the Corona Virus, many do not have the support systems that we have in Australia.

Watching these events unfold on the nightly news should bring us to our knees.

Today's bible reading from Romans is about the government.

What exactly is the role of government?

What responsibilities does it have to its people?

What responsibilities do citizens have to their governments?

How are we to respond to and pray for what's happening in the midst of the riots with Corona Virus?

Government has been ordained by God to preserve order, protect citizens, and promote righteousness.

Let's begin in Romans 13: "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

The authorities that exist have been established by God.

"Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?

Then do what is right, and they will commend you.

For they are God's servant to do you good" (Romans 13:1-4).

God is pro-government.

Given the fallen nature of this planet and the human race, God has decreed that some form of earthly oversight is necessary to bring order to society, to protect that society from evil forces within and without, and to promote God's concern for justice, goodness, beauty, compassion, and peace.

We need someone or something to restrain our foolish tendencies and to incite our better qualities.

Seatbelts can be annoying sometimes.

Some people just don't want to be bothered even when the law requires them to buckle up.

According to the Associated Press, a New Zealander named Ivan Segedin took it to an extreme.

The police ticketed him 32 times over five years for failing to use his seat belt.

Even though this was costing him big money, Segedin refused to buckle up.

Finally, instead of obeying the law, the man decided to rely on deception.

He made a fake seat belt that would hang over his shoulder and make it appear that he was wearing a seat belt when he was not.

This worked for a while. Then, he had a head-on collision.

He was thrown forward onto the steering wheel and killed.

Discussing the accident, the coroner described the fake seat belt: "Though his car was fitted with seat belts, an extra belt with a long strap had been knotted above the seat belt on the driver's side, providing a belt to simply sit over the driver's shoulder."

I think every one of us has a story about disobeying the law.

There are many who think, if I were in charge, not only would it be different, it would be better.

We may not always appreciate the police with their radar gun, but would any of us feel safe on the highways with no speed limits and no law enforcement?

We may resent the taxes withheld from our pay, but do we really believe the majority of people would contribute to the common good and relief of the poor if it was optional?

We may be over social distancing, but it is to protect us and others. We need government.

It is very important to note that God does not endorse *every person* who holds governmental office.

God grants those in authority freedom to exercise that authority as they see fit, and they don't always exercise it rightly.

From the Pharaohs of Egypt to the emperors of Rome to the monarchs of Europe to the dictators of the modern world—rulers have betrayed their God-given mandate.

In a similar way, God grants us freedom to elect or appoint our leaders, but people don't always choose wisely.

Hitler rose to power on a wave of popular support.

God has ordained government, but God's will is not always done in the political realm, just as it is not always done in the personal realm.

God has not ordained any particular party.

God ordains that there should be some form of government, and that government has certain responsibilities to fulfill.

So what is our responsibility to government?

How are we to respond to the governments that exist, especially when they fail to fulfill their God-given mandate?

Christians are to cooperate with their government whenever possible, challenge their government whenever necessary, and pray for their government at all times.

1 Peter 2: Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among people: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right.

For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people....

Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the king (1 Peter 2:13–17).

Christ-followers should be good citizens.

If government is God's servant, then it only makes sense for us to cooperate with government whenever possible, which typically means obeying the laws of the land, paying taxes, voting in elections, serving the local community when called upon, and generally contributing to the well-being of society.

But there's more to it than just keeping the rules.

Peter is also calling for a positive and respectful attitude toward government, even when we don't agree.

Peter gave these instructions when Nero was ruling Rome.

History tells us that Nero was a murderous, unstable, and foolish ruler.

When the city of Rome nearly burned to the ground, he blamed it on the Christians and unleashed a wave of persecution against them.

But what do we do when our leaders' policies don't fit with God's word?

Sometimes we need to challenge our government and hold them accountable for their responsibilities.

We can disagree publicly and respectfully. We can vote people out of office.

We can hold prayer meetings!

When the government forbids something that God commands, or commands something that God forbids, we must obey God.

Throughout Scripture we find examples of people who righteously refused to cooperate with the authorities: the Hebrew midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to kill all the male newborns;

Daniel refused to stop praying;

Peter, who wrote these very words, refused to stop speaking in the name of Jesus even when he was so ordered by the governor.

But even in these situations, the believers maintained respect for those in office and willingly accepted the consequences of their disobedience.

There will be occasions when government lead in a direction that is contrary to God's purposes and our Christian convictions.

When that happens, it is our responsibility to challenge that authority but to do so in a way that does not compromise the gospel of Christ.

Lastly, we pray for the government at all times.

Paul says in his letter to Timothy, "I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for leaders and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1–2).

Regardless of our political point of view, it is our responsibility to pray for those who lead us, that they might have wisdom for the decisions they face, that they might be people of character and integrity, and that they might faithfully fulfill the demands of their office.

God is King over all the earth God loves all people everywhere, and he loves them equally.

This is not always an easy truth for God's people to embrace.

The prophet Jonah couldn't understand God's compassion for the wicked city of Nineveh.

The early Christians had a hard time believing that there was room in God's

kingdom for Gentiles. God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34–35).

conclusion

Archibald Rutledge tells about a man who worked in one of the great forests of the South.

His faithful dog burned to death in a great fire that had swept through the forest. Rutledge said the little dog had been left under a tree to guard his master's dinner pail and wouldn't leave it even when the flames roared around him.

The worker was broken hearted when he found the charred remains of his little friend.

With tears streaming down his face, he said: "I always had to be careful what I told him to do, because I knew he would do it."

Our ultimate allegiance is to Christ, as followers of Jesus, we are first and foremost citizens of a heavenly kingdom and subjects of the Most High God.

Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17).

We owe our nation loyalty, submission, and service. But we owe our lives and our love to God.