



all anew

READY OR NOT

by Kelly Fryer 

SESSION THREE UPEND THE TABLES

OVERVIEW

Giving birth is a beautiful thing and essential to life, but there is nothing nice about it. It is a violent process that produces pain, requires sacrifice and makes a really big mess. That's what we are asking for when we plead with God for renewal. Are you ready?

GETTING READY

Centering questions

The biblical story is filled with characters who challenged unjust systems, took action that turned societal norms upside down and spoke truth to power. What systems are you a part of that need to be challenged? What counter-cultural, justice-making actions are you being called to take? Are you ready?

Take a minute to center yourself and open your heart and mind to hear God speaking to you through the words and stories in the Bible.

OPENING PRAYER

God, help us hear your Word to us through the biblical story and through the words we speak to each other today. Give us wisdom to hear your call to be a part of what you are doing in this world as an overflowing gift of love and grace. Give us courage to answer that call with joy. Amen.

GETTING REAL

In this section of the study, Scripture holds up a mirror, helping us think about things a little differently and empowering us to ques-

tion what we see in ourselves, our congregations and our world.

Our text

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God ...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” (Romans 13:1, 6–7).

A reflection

Can you imagine being a Christian living in Rome and hearing Paul’s words telling you to pay your taxes and respect the government?

Although it might have happened before you were born, as a Christian and a Roman, you have heard all the stories. This is the same government whose agent presided over Jesus’ trial and had him put to death. This was the same government that banished your Jewish relatives not all that long ago and now sees your little church as a threat. It is the same government that will eventually arrest and kill some of your friends.

What would compel Paul to write these words to the church in Rome? Paul himself suffered flogging, stoning and imprisonment during his ministry, and the Book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16). He was painfully aware that governments are not always good or just.

But Paul’s argument is not based on the intrinsic characteristics of governing authorities. It is based,

rather, on the power of God, without whom there is no authority at all. There is no real authority that does not come from God. All authorities have “been instituted by God,” which means that God is the boss of everyone who governs. Earlier in Romans, Paul shows how God is the boss of *everything*, even sin (3:23–24) and death (6:9). It follows, therefore, that God is the authority over every authority, including the systems of government and all those who govern.

Government, Paul tells the Romans, was created by God (13:1) and is one of the ways God is at work in the world today, giving order to our lives and making sure justice gets done. And make no mistake about it: God’s *intention* for government is that it should do good. Paul puts it this way, “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” (13:3–4a).

The government is “God’s servant for...good.”

So what happens when governing authorities do not do good, when they do not help those in need, when they act with vengeance, when they return evil with evil, when they attempt to impose one religion on everyone? What is our responsibility when government—or parts of government—are broken? What are we to do when the very systems that have been put in place to protect people and make sure justice is done become tools to oppress?

Are we under some kind of obligation to let the governing authorities do whatever they want? Do we just stand by and allow injustice to continue?

Unfortunately, Paul does not answer these questions directly in his letter to the Romans. That would have been a helpful thing for him to do. But Paul does say two things to help us answer the question for ourselves.

First, however much you might want to, you can’t run away from government. You can’t just change the channel. You are bound by your conscience to stay engaged. For example, you pay your taxes (13:6). You act like a citizen.

Second, in your role as a citizen (as in every other aspect of your life), there is a particular way God wants you to act. That’s actually what this whole second half of Paul’s letter is all about. In chapters 1–11 Paul describes God’s work to set us free from sin and death. Then, starting in chapter 12, Paul says that this freedom from sin and death produces the freedom to live a new life. This new life is the “will of God” for us (12:2). Here’s what it looks like: We are to be humble (12:3), use sober judgment (12:3), use our gifts for the good of the community (12:6–8), love one another (12:10), give to those in need (12:13), live in harmony (12:16), leave vengeance to the Lord (12:19), return evil with good (12:21), avoid laziness (13:13), welcome those who are different from you (14:1–6), make peace (14:19) and don’t impose your way of being religious on others (14:1–23).

These are the kinds of behaviors God expects from us all—including, we can conclude, all those who are under God’s authority. In other words, this is how God expects those who govern to act too.

So *what* do we do when those in authority are not good and government is not acting for justice?

Two words: Fix it.

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

1. **The government, Paul seems to say, is to be honored and respected. But just like everything else that God has made, the government must be held accountable to act in a way that is in alignment with God’s will. In other words, you can’t support the government unconditionally and neither can you just bash it. Is this a message that needs to be heard today? Why or why not?**
2. **Have you ever been part of an effort to challenge, influence or change something the government was doing (or not doing)? If so, how did your faith inform your actions? If not, why not?**
3. **In chapters 12–14 Paul describes what God expects of those who live under God’s authority. Quickly review those chapters now. It’s a long list and, odds are, our governing authorities are not going to get it right all the time.**

That means we need to be diligent in making sure our government is acting in a way that is right and just.

- a. How do you respond to the idea that we must stay in a mutually accountable relationship with our government?
- b. Does this idea challenge, encourage, excite or exhaust you? Why?

GETTING RENEWED

In this section, we go deep and spend time really listening for what God might be saying to us through a particular story in the Bible.

Read Matthew 12:1–14. Discuss:

1. What jumps out at you in these stories?
2. What do you hear God saying to you, personally, through these stories?
3. What do you hear God saying to your community (your town, your congregation, your denomination, your Bible study group) through these stories?

A reflection

When Paul wrote to the Romans that God is the boss of every single thing, even “governing authorities,” he was taking a page out of Jesus’ own playbook.

There were so many stories being told about Jesus in Paul’s day, stories about how Jesus challenged the authorities. Many of those stories were eventually captured in writing and included in the canon of Scripture that we read today. Two of those stories are told in the 12th chapter of Matthew, in quick succession. They are also told, in a strikingly similar way, by both Mark and Luke.

First, we’re told about the day Jesus and his disciples were out walking. “At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath’” (12:1–2).

Now, the Pharisees didn’t have any official power,

and they certainly were not what you would call a governing authority. They were members of a movement made up of lay people who were passionate about studying and interpreting the Torah and dedicated to reviving Judaism through strict obedience to God’s Law. They had no official authority, but they were powerful because they had influence in the community and among religious leaders.

In some ways, Jesus could have been the Pharisees’ natural ally. He was also a layperson who was passionate about what God is doing in the world, and he called people to follow God’s path. He could also go toe-to-toe with them on the Law. In fact, that’s what he did when he challenged their interpretation of the rules about picking grain on the Sabbath.

But Jesus didn’t stop there.

“He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here’” (12:3–6). According to Mark and Luke, he even more boldly proclaimed, the Son of Man is lord even “of the sabbath” (Mark 6:5 & Luke 6:5).

Jesus wasn’t just challenging the Pharisees or their interpretation of the Law. If that was all he was doing, things might have turned out differently. They might have just found a shady tree to sit under where they could spend hours pouring over every dash and dot in the Torah, debating until the sun went down. But Jesus did more than that. He was challenging their whole worldview. Jesus is making the point here that what God is doing is bigger than the temple. It is bigger than the Sabbath. It is bigger than any and every political or religious authority on this earth.

Immediately following their showdown in the grain field, the writers tell us Jesus went to the synagogue. There he saw a man who had a withered hand, a disability that surely would have made it difficult for him

to work and care for himself. Jesus called the man to come forward, and then he turned and asked the Pharisees, who were there watching him and waiting to catch him doing something unlawful, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or kill?” They were silent. Mark says Jesus was angry and “grieved at their hardness of heart.” He told the man to stretch out his hand, and immediately the hand was restored.

Jesus didn’t even have to say anything this time. His actions spoke loud and clear. God is on a mission to heal and save. And God is the boss of everything. All laws—even The Law—are meant to be for our good. They are meant to save and protect us, to ensure our good health. They are not meant to harm us. And when they do, they must be challenged.

By the way, as they tell the story, all three evangelists agree: This was Jesus’ undoing. He had brought a challenge the Pharisees could not, would not tolerate. They “were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:11). They “went out and immediately conspired against him, how to destroy him” (Matthew 12:14).

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

- 1. This story is told from Jesus’ perspective. Imagine that you are a Pharisee, and you have devoted your life to teaching God’s law and urging others to follow it. Then you see Jesus and his disciples doing something that you believe flagrantly breaks that law. How would you respond? Why?**
- 2. What has your experience with “authority” been? Have those experiences led you to automatically trust those in authority or distrust them? How can these biblical stories help each of us move beyond our own experience to a more nuanced relationship with “the law” and authorities?**
- 3. Laws are meant to protect us and ensure our good health whether they are made by civil government or the church. Can you think of laws or rules that have needed to be challenged in the past? What happened? What laws or rules need to be challenged today?**

- 4. It can be especially difficult to protest, challenge and work to change unjust laws or rules when our protests produce a negative reaction (even “fury,” as in the case of the Pharisees). Who are the courageous changemakers that you admire, past or present? What can we learn from them?**

GETTING RILED UP

This section lifts up a contemporary issue and challenges us to see it within the context of what God is saying to us through the biblical story.

Our text

“Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...” (Romans 13:11–12).

A reflection

It is standard fare at political rallies these days to hear chants of “USA! USA!” and for political speeches from leaders in both major parties to claim that America is “number one!” and/or to call for changes that will make us “number one” again.

To be sure, the United States of America is a great nation in many ways. But there are some ways in which we lead the world that should not make us feel proud.

For example, the USA has more “crimes” on the books than any other country of similar economic and political influence. California created 1,000 new ones in the past 25 years. New York has more than 10,000. Most of them, like panhandling or having a broken tail-light, aren’t actually “crimes” at all.

In order to enforce all of these crimes, a huge army of law enforcement officers has been assembled, 24 percent more per capita than Germany, 66 percent more than England and Wales, 82 percent more than Canada. They are armed like they’re headed to war, using free equipment from the Pentagon’s overstock, and sent out to arrest people who are then fined and charged court fees, who literally pay for their time in

jail, who get hired out like slaves to private clothing manufacturers, call centers and other companies to work for 35 cents an hour, and who are unemployed when they get released due to legal discrimination against people who are convicted of a crime, meaning the odds are good they'll be back in jail again soon and stuck in the system for a lifetime.

This proliferation of newly made-up crimes, the militarization of law enforcement and the privatization of the prison system have produced mass incarceration in this country. More than 25 percent of the world's prisoners are in the United States, even though we make up just 5 percent of the world's population. In fact, 35 *states* in this country have a higher incarceration rate than any other *nation* in the world.

A disproportionate number of the people who have been ensnared in the criminal justice system are women and men of color, the majority of whom are there for nonviolent offenses and/or as a result of the "War on Drugs" (even though people of color are no more likely to be guilty of drug offenses than whites). And in the course of business some of them die.

In fact, America is in a class of its own when it comes to fatal police shootings. There have been 55 fatal police shootings in England and Wales during the last 24 years; we had 59 in this country during the first 24 days of 2015 alone. California has a population 10 percent larger than Canada but 200 percent more fatal police shootings every year. People of color are not more likely to break the law than white people, but people of color are far more likely to be stopped, detained, arrested, convicted, jailed and/or killed by police than whites. Of the 567 people killed by police officers in the first five months of 2016, 51 percent were people of color, a group that makes up just 38 percent of the population. Blacks, who make up 12 percent of the population, represent 25 percent of all those killed.¹

It doesn't have to be this way. We can do something about it. We can begin by acknowledging that our

criminal justice system is broken and then take concrete action steps like these:

- Stop criminalizing everything.
- Replace the "war on drugs" with drug treatment programs.
- Empty the jails of everyone who is there for a nonviolent offense.
- End privatization of the criminal justice system.
- Cap the amount municipalities can earn from fines and court fees.
- Give the grenade launchers and tanks back to the Pentagon.
- Train police officers to de-escalate, recognize and deal with mental illness and build relationships with community members.
- Don't put the police in charge of investigating officers suspected of wrongdoing, and don't let their friends, like the district attorneys they work with every day, take them to trial; give that job to an independent prosecutor.
- Put an end to racial profiling once and for all, even for the U.S. Border Patrol.
- Don't let our elected leaders in the United States capitol give money to any city, county, state or agency that fails to make these changes.

Our political and religious systems only exist by the authority given to them by God. They have been created to do good. We are bound by conscience to be engaged, to hold them accountable. That requires, in a phrase used by activists who are working to change this system, being "woke."

It means answering the call we hear in Paul's letter to the Romans to "wake up from sleep," for the night is far gone and the day is near.

Do we dare?

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

1. **Is this data something you already knew or is it new**

¹ For more information about racial bias in our criminal justice system and for resources to help you take a stand against racism, read *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander or visit naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet, pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/18/chart-of-the-week-the-black-white-gap-in-incarceration-rates/ and ywcatucson.org

information? What is your response to it?

2. How does this data change (or not) your view of those who have been protesting police violence over the past few years?
3. At the end of his life, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said he believed it was time to work together for “human rights” for all, not just civil rights. All these years later, our government has incarcerated an untenable number of black and brown people, most for nonviolent crimes. The U.N. Human Rights Committee has expressed ongoing concern about the racial disparities in our criminal justice system and called for reform, especially in regards to mandatory sentencing laws. The U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has criticized the U.S. for having a “school-to-prison pipeline” created, in part, by zero-tolerance discipline policies.²
 - a. Why are we allowing these policies to continue? Why do we, as a nation, seem to accept a situation the world thinks is abominable?
 - b. What is your faith community doing about this?
4. Paul calls us to “wake up” and put on the “armor of light.” What would that look like for you? What would that look like for your faith community?

GETTING RELEASED

This year, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we remember that we have been part of God’s work to make all things new for a very, very long time.

One of the things everyone is celebrating this year is how many of the divisions, which can be traced back to the Reformation, have been healed. But we also honor the courage of those 16th century reformers to challenge the religious authorities of their day.

People, especially the poor, were being taken advantage of by church authorities. Indulgences, or as

the reformers called them, “unadulterated lies concocted for profit,” were being sold to unknowing, simple folk who just wanted some assurance that they and their loved ones would get to heaven.

“These errors are not to be taken lightly,” declared the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, one of the most radical documents of the Reformation (ironically written by Philip Melancthon, one of the more mild-mannered reformers). “Truly they do harm to the glory of Christ and bring souls to ruin. They cannot be ignored.”³

Standing up to authority and challenging oppressive systems: It’s in our blood.

What now?

1. As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we honor the work of reform at the same time that we work to overcome the divisions it created. How can this be an example to others in our nation and our world?
2. God is making all anew. That’s what God has always done. In what ways are you being called to participate in the new things God is doing today to bring peace, justice, freedom and dignity to all?
3. Who do you know who needs to be in this conversation? What will you do to invite them in?
4. What are you going to do now?

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² Learn more from Amnesty International. [amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/military-police-and-arms/police-and-human-rights/mass-incarceration-in-the-usa](https://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/military-police-and-arms/police-and-human-rights/mass-incarceration-in-the-usa)

³ *The Book of Concord*, Augsburg Fortress, 2000, p. 338