

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18A)

September 7, 2014

Text: Romans 13:1–10

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's commonly said that there are two things one shouldn't discuss in public or in polite company. You know what they are: religion and politics. And yet, we find ourselves in a religious service with a sermon text that discusses politics. So, knowing that we are entering into territory where angels fear to tread, let us look more closely at Romans 13 for the purpose of talking about religion and politics.

Keep in mind who Paul is writing to: the Christians who reside in the city of Rome. Rome was the “Washington DC” of their day: the capital city of the most powerful nation in the world. Politics and government were in the air they breathed. They couldn't get away from it. Naturally, Paul speaks to them about politics.

How is the forgiven and justified Christian, who has died with Christ in baptism and risen again by the power of the Gospel to walk in newness of resurrection life, to think about and live within earthly government? Remember what we heard last week from Romans 12:9, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” Even in politics, we express genuine love, abhor the evil, and cling to the good. Yes, we Christians are to do that even in politics. Sound shocking? Just wait, it gets better.

Paul begins with a rather universal statement about how people relate to government, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is not authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (vs. 1). Note a couple of things here. Submission to government is universal, applying to everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike. The Bible does not give Christians permission to disobey governmental leaders or the laws, ordinances, and statutes the government enacts.

Only one exception is given in the Bible. If the government commands us to disobey God's Word, and it must be a clear word of God, we must obey God rather than man. Laws that we think stupid, inconvenient, or frivolous don't fit into this one exception. The law must be a clear violation of God's Word. This precedent is established in

Acts 5:29 when the Jewish Sanhedrin, a legitimate governmental authority in 1st century Israel, commanded the apostles not to preach in Jesus' name. The apostles had a clear and certain command from Jesus to preach in His name to all nations. They must obey God rather than man.

Even in this situation, the apostles didn't incite a riot or rebellion. They obeyed God rather than the illegitimate commands of a legitimate government. And they submitted to the punishment they received. Acts 5:41 describes the conclusion to this matter like this, "Then they left (i.e., apostles) the presence of the council (i.e., Sanhedrin), rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (i.e., Jesus' name)." They had been beaten for their refusal to obey man rather than God. And they submitted to the consequences and rejoiced that they were found worthy to follow the example of the Lord they were proclaiming.

A second thing that must be pointed out is that Paul commands obedience to governmental authority regardless of whether or not the government is liked or even wanted. He doesn't write "submit to the governing authorities if you like them, or agree with them, or think they're doing a good job, or if they happen to agree with your political opinions..." The command is absolute and universal, "submit to the governing authorities." Period. No qualifiers, no exceptions.

How does this apply to us today? We Christians must submit to the US government regardless of which party is in control of the White House, the halls of Congress, the gubernatorial mansion, the state legislature, the mayoral house, county commissioners, the city council, sheriff's office, or any other elected or appointed political position. The call to obedience is true whether or not the civic leader is politically conservative or liberal. It doesn't even matter whether or not the person is a Christian or not.

When Paul wrote these words in Romans 12, the Roman Empire was being ruled by Nero. At this point in his career, Nero was a good, decent ruler. The Roman Empire was likewise doing well. But Nero was a thoroughgoing pagan worshipping all the false gods of Roman antiquity. There wasn't a Christian thought or instinct in Nero; the same was true of most Roman officials at the time. And yet, Paul commands submission to the governing authorities. Later, Nero went insane and persecuted the Christians in a most brutal fashion; he was responsible for the deaths of Peter and Paul and so many more of God's people. But the Christians still prayed for him even though he sought to destroy them.

The reason Paul commands submission to legitimate government is stated in the second half of vs. 1, “For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” All authority is an extension of God’s authority. All authority, governmental, parental, military, etc., flows from the throne of God. Martin Luther describes this beautifully in his explanation to the 4th commandment, “Honor your father and your mother”, where he writes, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.” After teaching this to catechism students, I invariably ask them this question, “When your parents tell you to carry out the trash or to do your chores or to do your homework, who’s really telling you to do these things?” Without fail, they come to the right conclusion. Rather sheepishly, they always say, “God is telling me to do those things.”

The implications of Paul’s teaching are quite profound as we live out our lives of faith and obedience in this present world. For starters, it means that political leaders are “servants/ministers of God.” Paul calls them that three times, in vs. 4 (2x) and vs. 6. Now don’t expect your political leaders to lead you to Christ, or preach the Gospel, or administer the Sacraments. They aren’t ministers of the Gospel but rather ministers of God’s wrath! Look at vs. 4b, “But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” Government’s role is to curb evil, to keep society from tearing itself apart, and to carry out God’s wrath against evil. Yes, politicians are servants of God in this world for the sake of peace in this world. And for them we give hearty thanks and honor.

Another implication is that we need to banish the idea that government is a necessary evil. Not according to the Bible. Government is a good and necessary gift, a divine gift. They are God’s gift to restrain evil, to arbitrate disputes, to promote the general welfare, and to encourage a just degree of life and liberty in this world. This assumes that government has the ability to discern between what is good and what is evil, what is just and unjust.

That’s where we come in as Christians. Our sacred duty before God is to pray for our leaders, that God would help them to use their divine authority for the good of the country and the world. In I Timothy 2:1–3, Paul gives these instructions for pastors and churches “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that

we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior...”

As God’s holy people living in this world, we have the unique and holy privilege of praying for all who are in authority. Our prayers for governmental authority at all levels are very focused: “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” It is not an exaggeration to say that the world would fall apart without the prayers of Christians. That’s how important our prayers for government are today, how absolutely necessary your prayers are every day.

Vs. 5 really brings Paul’s teaching to an astonishing climax, “Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath (we’ve discussed this quite a bit, now get ready for something extraordinary) but also for the sake of conscience.” Your obedience to all legitimate authority is a spiritual act of worship. How’s that for a shocker? Paul illustrates this in vs. 6–7 with paying taxes and any other form of revenue, paying proper respect, and giving due honor to all authorities. My guess is you never thought that paying that 4% base sales tax (WY; NE = 5.5%) is an act of Christian worship. When you place that stamp on the envelope containing your quarterly tax payments, do so knowing it’s an act of worship in conscience obedience to God’s authority. When you serve on political boards and committees, when you vote, when you are elected to office, when you voice your political opinions, when you obey all laws and ordinances, you do so as an act of Christian worship. Rejoice in this privilege. Be at peace with a clear conscience as you participate in government as a necessary good.

Finally, remember who’s in charge: King Jesus. He’s the King of kings and Lord of lords. Your service in this world, political and spiritual, is but a foretaste of the royal reign you will exercise with Jesus in the new creation. Revelation 22:5 says we will rule and reign with King Jesus forever. All that you do, you do as God’s forgiven and blessed people. Every act in your daily lives is sacred for you are cleansed by the blood of Jesus. What high privileges are given to you dear saints of God. You are blessed indeed.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.