

SUBJECT

Romans 13:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

September 6, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 13, verses 1 through 10. The Apostle Paul has some difficult instructions for us. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Romans 13, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. 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. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear children of God and subjects of the government,

That, by the way, is who you are in God's two kingdoms. In God's heavenly realm you are, on the right hand, children of God. And in God's earthly realm you are, on the left hand, subjects of the government. You are subject to the United States of America, the state of North Dakota or Minnesota, and the city of Grand Forks, or East Grand Forks, or Thompson, or Reynolds, or Crookston, or whatever city you live in. In God's earthly kingdom we are subjects to all these levels of government that God has instituted.

We are children of God and subjects of the government.

These two identities seem to be in conflict with each other. Here's what I mean: If you are a child of God, then you are an heir of God's Kingdom. And since God is the ruler of all things, then it stands to reason that our status as heirs of the kingdom of heaven would place us above every worldly authority. In the grand scheme of things being a child of God and an heir of his kingdom is a higher status than anything on this earth. So it would stand to reason that Christians should be above the laws of this earth.

SUBJECT (Romans 13:1-10)

But we are obviously not, and here's why: The governments of this earth are also God's kingdom. They are God's *other* kingdom.

Here we distinguish between God's two kingdoms.

The big idea with the distinction between the two kingdoms is to remember that God is the ruler of both kingdoms, but he rules them in different ways.

In the right-hand kingdom we have the activity of the Church, primarily the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments. God deals with us by forgiving our sins on account of Jesus' death and resurrection. So the Gospel has the final say in the right-hand kingdom. And we are rightly ordered in this kingdom when we live by faith in Jesus.

But the forgiveness of sins is a horrible way to run a civil society, so God rules differently in the left-hand kingdom. In the left-hand kingdom is pretty much everything that isn't the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Civil governments, schools, and businesses are in the left-hand kingdom. Families, when they are Christian families, kind of have a foot in both, because good parents teach their children God's Word—that's a right-hand kingdom thing—but they also feed them, discipline them, and train them to live in this world—those are all left-hand kingdom things. God deals with us in the left-hand kingdom through instituted authorities who enforce his Law. So the Law has the only say in the left-hand kingdom. And we are rightly ordered in the left-hand kingdom when we live as obedient subjects to the authorities God has instituted and when we love our neighbors.

This is what we learn from Romans 13. "There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (13:1). That's the primary doctrinal point Paul makes in this passage. "There is no authority except from God." Or the positive way to say it is this: Every authority has been instituted by God. That's the primary doctrinal point. And Paul's application of that doctrinal point is this: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (13:1).

Christians have a love-hate relationship with this passage. There can be a flip-flop in attitude toward this text. It seems to go in cycles of either four or eight years. Perhaps you can figure out why. For four or eight years, some Christians really love this text, and they use it to tell other Christians fall in line. But then there's an election that doesn't really go their way, and they conveniently forget about Romans 13 for about four or eight years. But during this time, there's a different group of Christians that suddenly gains a new appreciation for it. And it goes back and forth. This is the love-hate relationship Christians have with this text.

Both sides are wrong. Paul's command to be subject to the governing authorities is especially applicable when you don't agree with them. It's easy to be subject to an authority you agree with. If that's all God wants, no command would be necessary. The commandment is given for the times we find it hard to be subject. So we can't ignore this text when it's difficult.

But it's also not a whip for us to use against other Christians in order to advance our political agenda. Just because a certain person is in office does not mean their policies are necessarily just and God-pleasing. If that were true, then the standard of justice would change every time we have an election, or even when we cross the river. Christians have a love-hate relationship with this text, and even when we love it, we're usually doing it wrong.

It has always been the case, and always will be the case, that governing authorities are sinful people who enact some just laws and some unjust laws. This is true, both for your party, and for the "other" party. If you approve of everything your party advocates for, there is probably something wrong. And if you dishonor authorities that come from the other party, there is definitely something wrong. The standard for Christians is to approve of what God approves of,

SUBJECT (Romans 13:1-10)

which will always cause some disagreement with our governing authorities, while also being subject to them and paying taxes, revenue, respect, and honor (13:7). If that sounds hard to do, that's because it is.

This is a text that, when you really get down to it, no one likes. One commentator put it this way, and I laughed when I read it, "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Rom. 13:1-7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning" (Moo, 805). In other words, Christians have always had difficulty with this. If it seems hard to us, imagine how hard it is for Christians in Nigeria today, or for Martin Luther when the emperor wanted his head, or for the Christians in Rome when Paul wrote this letter. They were often persecuted for their confession of faith, and it wouldn't be long until Nero started using them as human torches. Of course this passage is hard to accept, because no one likes to suffer, and everybody wants to rule the world, which means we probably think we could do a better job than the people who do.

There are two basic concepts I want you to remember from this sermon. And you'll see that they go hand-in-hand. First, the biblical concept of authority, and second, the biblical concept of subjection. And I'm emphasizing the word "biblical," because there is a worldly notion of authority and subjection that is completely contrary to the way the Bible describes them.

The worldly notion of authority and subjection, which we should really just call "demonic," is that those with power and authority use their position to serve themselves. So they end up using their subjects for their own personal gain. "Might makes right"—that's the idea. The subjects are the servants, and the authorities gain from the system.

Sometimes, not always, but sometimes earthly government works this way. This is a demonic notion of authority and subjection. And sometimes we slip into thinking that this is really what authority and subjection are.

But, contrary to this demonic notion, there is a biblical concept of authority and subjection. The biblical concept of authority is that the authorities are the servants. Let me say that again, because this is key: the authorities are the servants. If that sounds backward, you need to change your definition of authority. The biblical concept is the true one. The demonic notion is false. The authority is the servant. And I'll prove it to you in two ways.

First, we look at God, especially the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who said of himself, "**The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many**" (Matt. 20:28). And on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus knelt down to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:1-11). And just after he instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus said to his disciples, "**I am among you as the one who serves**" (Luke 22:27). Consider Jesus' life. Consider his death. Consider these things, first, because this is where our salvation comes from. But also notice that the highest authority in all the universe became the humblest servant. The greatest service of God is Jesus Christ laying down his life for his wandering and rebellious subjects.

God the Father also served you by creating you, and he continues to serve you by preserving your bodily life. And God the Holy Spirit was sent as your sanctifier and comforter. The worldly tendency of Christians is to think of ourselves as God's servants. And I suppose we are his servants; there is a mutual service. But God is far more a servant of you than you ever could be of him. God is the chief servant. That's the first proof.

Here's the second proof, and this one comes from the natural world. Look at the family. Who are the authorities? Mom and dad. But who serves whom? Some of us have children—which makes this really obvious—but all of us either are or have been children. So we all know that

SUBJECT (Romans 13:1-10)

parents are the chief servants in the house. Kids might not think so, because our sinful nature is to rebel against authority, but it's true. Dad and mom are the chief servants, and it's not close. They use their power and authority to serve. Even when they give commands—"Eat your vegetables. Clean your room. Take out the trash. Don't put that in your mouth"—their commandments are an act of service. Parents use their power and authority to provide for, protect, instruct, discipline, and nurture their children.

This is the biblical concept of authority. It begins with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and then it extends to the three estates—the Church, the home, and even government. The authority is the chief servant. I don't mean, of course, that we flip the power from the authority to the subject. The authority keeps the power, but they use their power to serve their subjects. Hear what Paul says of the governing authority: "He is God's servant for your good" (13:4).

There is, of course, a mutual service. We still serve God, children still serve their parents, and subjects still serve their governments. But the greater burden of service is on the authority. The authority is the chief servant. This is the biblical concept of authority.

And the biblical concept of subjection goes hand in hand with it. When you hear the word "subjection," it might have a negative connotation to it. But it shouldn't. If that's the case, let's work to replace the demonic definition with the biblical definition. When you hear the word "subjection," you might think merely in terms of obedience, perhaps even oppression. Oppression should not be part of subjection. That is not God's will. When authority is abused, it results in oppression. That's demonic. But that's not how God designed authority, and so it is also not the normal result. Remove oppression from the biblical concept of subjection. Subjection does, of course, still involve obedience, but obedience is still not the chief characteristic of subjection.

Think about this with me. If authority and subjection go hand in hand, and the authority figure is the chief servant, then what is the subject? The subject is the chief recipient. In the biblical structure of authority and subjection, to be subject means, above all else, to receive service from the authority.

We see this in the Church, where we, as God's children, receive his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through Jesus Christ. In the home children receive their parents' gifts of provision, protection, instruction, discipline, and nourishment. And in civil society we receive our government's good gifts of justice, peace, and order. In all three instances, the subjects also render obedience to their authorities, but even this obedience is not really for the sake of the authorities; it is for the sake of the subjects—for us and our neighbors. We render obedience, taxes, revenue, respect, and honor to our governing authorities for our own good and for the good of our neighbors.

If we are disobedient, we receive punishment, and rightly so. This is the will of God. Hear again what Paul says, "He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (13:4).

Now this is kind of an aside, but it's strangely relevant today. This is the one statement in this passage that clearly defines what the purpose of government is. Did you notice that? It's to carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. There are many things that a government may do. Our government does a lot of things. But there is one thing that a government must do. It must police, and that policing must involve punishment. This is the work of God. So a government must codify laws, enforce those laws, and punish those who break them. In our nation we split those responsibilities up between different entities; we have lawmakers, police, and courts, and that is

SUBJECT (Romans 13:1-10)

probably wise. There may be different ways to police, but if a government does not police, it is not a legitimate government, because that is one thing God instituted it to do. That's enough on that. If we are disobedient, we will be punished, and rightly so.

Now you may be thinking, "What about laws that are unjust or contrary to the will of God?" What is a Christian to do in such cases? Clearly, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). God is the higher authority. But it may also be helpful to remember that subjection is not the same thing as obedience, even though it typically includes obedience. Subjection means to be under authority. Sometimes it works to say, "No," in the kindest possible way. Other times, as we have means to do so, we can respectfully stand up to injustice. And sometimes we must simply disobey and bear the consequences. Disobedience, while accepting consequences, is still a form of subjection. Subjection does not mean passive obedience to injustice. That would be oppression, and that is not God's will.

I should also say that such situations are rare. Sometimes Christians have to suffer through them, but they are not the norm; they are not the rule. Remember, God instituted government, and he instituted it for our good. And so it is a matter of faith in God that we expect justice, order, and peace from our government. Even though our governments will always be comprised of sinners, we should expect God to accomplish good through them, and we should be subject to our government as an act of subjection to God.

Every authority that exists has been instituted by God.

To be subject to authority first means that we receive good gifts. We receive divine gifts. Every gift we receive, whether it is in the Church, in the home, or from civil government, is from God. To be in subjection to authority means, first, that we receive God's gifts.

And second, it means that we render obedience and honor. Even this is for our good and for the good of our neighbors.

Our government is a gift from God. And the people in it—the authorities you like and the ones you don't like—they are God's servants for your good. He accomplishes his will through them. Praise God! Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.