

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2020

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God's Work in the Two Kingdoms

Romans 13:1–7; Matthew 18:18–20

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

Eph 1:2

From the Epistle reading, St. Paul's letter to the Church in Rome: **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. . . . Pay to all what is owed to them** (Rom 13:1, 7a). And the words of our Lord from the Gospel: **"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them"** (vv 18–20).

You don't need me to tell you that we're in an election year. The signs of it are everywhere and growing—political ads, phone surveys, headline news, bumper stickers, yard signs. And all the *other* signs are there too. You've probably noticed or experienced them as well—the tension and anxiety, the bitterness and anger, the insults and hurt. As we all know, there are deep divisions in our society. What concerns me far more than the divisions in society—what makes me afraid—is that these political divisions so easily creep into the church, overshadow our identity in Christ, and too often cause a rift between us as Christians. It's no surprise that we don't see eye-to-eye with everyone in the world, but we should be able to live together as Christians.

When we step foot into the ballot box in November—and it is our duty to vote—we will do so as Christians. Your faith cannot be checked at the door. God's word doesn't tell us exactly who or what to vote for, but it is clear about right and wrong. It provides a standard against which to measure candidates and platforms. Which ones align most closely with the truth of God's created order, with His revealed law, and with His purposes for governing authorities? Because all fall short of God's standard to varying degrees, our consciences may lead us to different conclusions. As Christians, we should be able to discuss such things with one another clearly and calmly—over a cup of coffee, not on social media. If we Christians can't do this, then who can? Why would we expect the world to do any better in address such divisive things? As we head to November, let's remember the unity we have in Christ and in God's word. This unity is

deeper than any political differences we have. We are, above all, brothers and sisters *in Christ*, baptized and redeemed children of God.

Now I say this because the reading from Romans is all about governing authorities, a topic that cannot be avoided in this season. So, the theme of today's sermon:

BECAUSE GOD LOVES AND CARES FOR US AND ALL SINNERS,
HE RULES OVER US IN TWO KINGDOMS—
THROUGH GOVERNING AUTHORITIES AND THROUGH THE CHURCH.

I.

The first think to know is this: Sin makes both governing authorities and the Church necessary for society.

In Romans chapter 12, the second reading from last Sunday, St. Paul strongly and repeatedly said that private revenge is absolutely forbidden for Christians. You may not take revenge on someone who has harmed you. This doesn't mean, however, that God doesn't care about evil. It doesn't mean that He wants society to collapse into chaos where bullies and powerbrokers do whatever they want and get away with it. God cares about order in society. When someone commits murder or even a serious robbery (this is true not only in our country but even in the worst-governed societies), everyone affected wants good authorities to find the culprit and administer justice. This is a basic human instinct, and a good one. We can't live or thrive in chaos. We desire an ordered, properly functioning society.

This idea is present in the founding of our own government. In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison recognized how the reality of sin makes government necessary. He wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." Men and women, of course, aren't angels. Neither are children, despite what we sometimes say about them. And because we aren't angels but sinners, governing authorities are necessary—at home, at school, in the workplace, and in society. Order is part of God's original plan for creation. Now, since the fall, that order is maintained by coercion, threats, and the use of force.

In Romans 13, St. Paul instructs us as Christians on faithful and appropriate attitudes and behaviors in our earthly relationships, especially toward governing authorities. He begins with this blanket statement: "**Let every person be subject to the governing authorities**" (v 1). Even when Christians aren't well regarded in society, we must not add to that a reputation for being troublemakers, uncooperative, or dissidents. We are always, St. Paul says, to obey the law—with one exception—*except* when the law of the

land comes into conflict with what God commands. Then, with that one exception, we can say with St. Peter, **“We must obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29). Because Jesus is the true Lord, our true Lord and the true Lord of the world, we don’t need to cause unnecessary quarrels with lesser lords in His name. We follow Christ by taking our proper place under governing authorities, by being subject to them as long as it doesn’t conflict with God’s direct commands.

At the same time, while governing authorities exist *because* of sin, they aren’t the ultimate answer to sin. If men were angels, forgiveness would not be necessary and so the Church would not be necessary either. Just as the governing authorities are needed because of sin, the Church is also needed because of sin. *We* need the forgiveness of sins, and, thank God, we receive forgiveness in Christ’s Church. We believe that “in this Christian Church [God the Holy Spirit] daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers” (*Small Catechism*).

II.

How does God work in these two kingdoms—through governing authorities and in the Church? God loves and cares for us by restraining sin through governing authorities and by forgiving and changing sinners through the Church.

As St. Paul wrote, **“There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment”** (Rom 13:1–2).

We believe that governing authorities are a gift of God. In the first article of the Apostles’ Creed we say, “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Governing authorities are one of the ways in which God defends, preserves, and provides for His creation and for us in our lives. When they rightly serve as a terror to bad conduct and use the sword to restrain and punish sin, good government is a means by which God gives us peace, order, and stability, so that we can lead quiet and peaceable lives.

Now, to be clear, when St. Paul calls the governing authorities “servants of God,” who bear the sword and carry out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer, he doesn’t mean that they always bear the sword well or rightly. He isn’t condoning or approving everything they do. Rulers don’t always do what is just or good or right. As I said earlier, there may even be times when obedience to God’s word requires disobedience to the authorities. When those times come, we must also be ready to suffer the consequences. We ought to ask before we ever disobey the authorities, “Is this disobedience required by God’s word and is He calling me to suffer the consequences that will follow from

disobedience?” When the governing authorities are unjust, bad, or wrong in other ways, we obey as much as we can and work through legal means for changes.

After all, those who govern are no angels either. Madison also said, “If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” If angels ruled us, they would do it perfectly. In this world, angels aren’t ruling us. That’s why our Constitution has checks and balances on governing authorities. St. Paul points to an even higher level of checks and balances than that: because governing authorities are *from* God, they are also accountable *to* God. We tend to remember that governing authorities are accountable to “we the people” while forgetting that they are accountable to an even higher authority. Moreover, governing authorities don’t get to decide what is good or bad, what is right or wrong. These things are determined by God’s word and will. He determines good and bad. He names what is evil. St. Paul makes clear that authorities are ministers of God when they attend to the things God has given them to do, when they recognize what God calls good and evil, when they see themselves as under His authority, and when they approve the good and punish evildoers.

This is a temporary remedy in our world. No matter how good governing authorities may be, they cannot bring about real change in the hearts of people. Christ comes through the Church to do what no governing authority can do: He not only forgives sin; He also make a new creation. St. Paul says, “**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation**” (2 Cor 5:17). He also says, “**We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life**” (Rom 6:4).

III.

As we think of God ruling in these two kingdoms, we consider the end for which He does these things. Where are we headed? With the best governing authorities or government we could possibly have, we would enjoy peace and order in this life. With Christ ruling over the Church, we are headed for something far better. We know there is something more than leading a peaceable and well-ordered life here. We look forward to the life of the world to come.

The instructions St. Paul gives here—both for Christians *and* for ruling authorities—are here to serve the Church. Why does God desire peace, order, and stability for us? Why does He want us to thrive here? So that God’s word can be shared and spread! So that the good news of Jesus Christ can be proclaimed! So that sinners are not only restrained from their sin but can be called to repentance, receive the forgiveness of sin, and walk in newness of life! This is also the purpose of having a good government. It provides the

conditions in which the Church can flourish and in which our Lord Jesus can forgive sins. It's often said that the Church grows and flourishes in times of persecution and suffering. I do believe that to be true, but let's not romanticize that. It's not particularly easy for the Church to flourish when there is persecution. When Christians are being scattered and pastors are being killed, it isn't good. When there is peace and order, we can proclaim God's word freely and without repercussions. We can call people to repentance and forgive their sins. *We* can be called to repentance and have our sins forgiven!

I wonder if we haven't become a little too complacent in our country, too content with the peace, order, and stability that we have, forgetting that God gives this to us in part so that we can make the name of our Lord Jesus Christ known. Let's not be shy to confess our faith. Whatever political discussions we may want to get into—and, again, don't do it online, but perhaps over a cup of coffee—let's spend even more time in witness to our faith, confessing what we have in the Church through Christ: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

We rejoice in that gift today. We live in two kingdoms, but today the kingdom of God comes to you in the Church. As Jesus promised, **“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them”** (Mt 18:20), and there He is with His forgiveness. So today His kingdom comes and forgives you all your sins, forgives you for the anger, the bitterness, the insults, and the hurt that you've been part of. He also comes to bind up the ways you've been wounded.

What would it be like if we Christians lived in the manner that St. Paul says? If we subjected ourselves to the governing authorities? If we regarded them like this? If we lived decent and peaceable lives? If we showed respect for others? If we confessed our faith? We have a wonderful and tremendous opportunity this year, right now, in the next two months. It's not primarily the opportunity to vote but the opportunity to live as Christians in this time, to bear witness to what we believe about God's two kingdoms. He rules over the world through governing authorities and He comes in the Church to forgive sins.

More than anything else, pray. Pray for God's will to be done. Pray for God to provide peace, order, and stability in our land, so that the Gospel may go forth unhindered. We know who our ruler is. The King of love my Shepherd is. He rules us now with His love and forgiveness in the Church. He cares for us in the world through governing authorities. And He will bring us at last into His heavenly kingdom. We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So take heart, dear Christians, in this time and season. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfect of our faith. Remember that He rules over His Church in mercy, and He also rules over all. As Christians, we trust in God's mercy for our salvation, and we live in faithful obedience to civil authorities, knowing that they have been instituted by God and that He is the highest authority of all. God grant this for Jesus' sake.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

Credit for some of the thoughts and expressions goes to Rev. John Bombaro "Epistles: Romans 13:1-10 (Pentecost 14: Series A)," from <https://www.1517.org/articles/epistles-romans-131-10-pentecost-14-series-a>.