

“The Christian Citizen” (Part II)

Liturgical Date: Proper 18 A

Primary Text: Romans 13:1-10

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today is once again the Epistle Lesson from Romans, the 13th chapter. Last Sunday we began to look at what the Bible teaches us about citizenship. We learned that Christians are “dual citizens” in that we live under the authority of both the right hand kingdom of the Church and the left hand kingdom of the state. Both of these are ruled by God, but have distinct roles and functions. We also saw how Romans 13 reflects how earthly government is a blessing from God in that without someone to maintain order and punish law breakers this sinful world would quickly descend into the chaos of anarchy. Today we continue with two other key principles relating to this topic and wrap up the sermons of the last few weeks with the most important thing in living as Christian in the Church, the world, and the state. The title of the sermon is, “The Christian Citizen, Part II.”

Our nation has certainly had its problem and has its problems. But over our history this has been a pretty safe country to be a Christian in, or just about any other religion for that matter. Of course it has not always perfectly been applied, but freedom of religion is a cornerstone of our nation and specifically proclaimed in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights. That type of freedom has not, and is not, the case for many people in many places. The words of Romans 13 get our attention, but our reaction to them may be a little different than others in other places.

While these words certainly speak to us today and have application, obviously the original recipients of the book of Romans were not Americans. They were followers of Jesus in Rome. When you read the words of Romans 13 think about how hard those words must have been to hear for them. Paul was not writing these God-inspired words to people living in a representative democracy with freedom of speech and religion under the Bill of Rights! These were believers experiencing persecution. Imagine being in a gathering of your congregation there and hearing about justification by grace through faith. Yes! Good stuff. Then it says that we should love our Christian brothers and sisters. Agreed. Love your enemies. Yeah, that's hard but we know Jesus said to do that. Then this part about government hits your ears. Really? Nero is the Roman Emperor who oversaw horrendous things done to Christians. No doubt those words that Chapter 13 began with, "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities*" must have been tough to swallow. Then it goes on to say that if you resist them, you are resisting God. They actually are doing you good in that they keep order in society. Oh, and subject yourself to them including paying your taxes in respect and honor. Also remember that Jesus addressed the issue of paying taxes too. Ouch. Furthermore, in 1 Timothy 2, it says to pray for your leaders. There is no * with an exception for ones that you don't agree with (as Lutherans have and do). Think about our hymn "God Bless Our Native Land; Firm may she ever stand; To Thee aloud we cry: God save the state!" If this one existed in the 1st Century it probably wouldn't have been a popular choice for the Hymn of the Day!

Thanks be to God that we have not had an American President up to this point that has persecuted Christians anywhere near to the level of Nero or other leaders. But we should be prepared because we don't know what

will come in the future. The more the number of Christians decrease in this country, the more bold persecution will likely become. Sometimes the person we vote for does not win and we may not like that. I can remember being in a Bible study at another church years ago where the people were overwhelmingly Republican. Barack Obama had recently been re-elected and one of the participants raised a question as they were concerned about the future of the country. The pastor answered by saying, in part, that we must understand that exactly the person that God wanted to win the election had won because no leader is chosen other than those who He wants to be there. An audible groan rose from the class! Of course this pastor was correct. If God had no control over whom the leaders in the nations were, He would not be omnipotent. Nor does God forget about an election. We may not know His purpose for a particular leader being in power, Republican or Democrat, but He does.

At this point we must be sure we understand what the Bible is telling us about political leadership and what it is not. Is the Bible teaching us in Romans 13, or anywhere else, that everything that every government does is right and God-pleasing? Absolutely not! What it is teaching us is that God is sovereign and that He can use even a bad government. Nowhere in our text is there a defense of what the Romans are doing to the Church. Neither would we defend the wicked actions we see that have been perpetuated under governments historically or today. We can and should condemn those actions. In summary, no authority is in place apart from God but that does not mean that the left hand kingdom will always do what is right and good. The 4th Commandment is “Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother” and Lutherans have always taught that the root of this Commandment is

submitting to God-ordained authority. Yes, that is our parents but also teachers, bosses, and our government.

Now this leads us to a somewhat thorny question that not all Christians have agreed on. Can we ever disobey the government? This has become a bigger issue lately with the restrictions put in place in response to the Coronavirus Pandemic as well as protests and unrest in the wake of African Americans who have died at the hands of the police.

There is no way we could parse each individual situation this morning. However, you do know that we had to make some decisions about what to do here in terms of what we did about gathering together in person as the pandemic hit. Churches all across the country have had to make decisions, and not all of them made the same decisions. We also must understand that there are multiple factors in play, as some governments have made recommendations, some made mandates. Churches are in different contexts with different size congregations and different types of facilities. What our governing authorities said was not the only factor in what we decided to do, but it certainly was an important consideration. It is hard to make a decision that everyone agrees with but I pray that how we have approached this is rooted in Scriptural principles.

Back to the big question at hand, can we, or to take it further, are their times when it is the right thing for Christians to defy the governing authorities? Yes. In Acts 5:27-29 the Apostles had been ordered to stop preaching the Gospel. They refused to obey this order because Jesus had commanded them to go forth and preach the Gospel to every person and nation and there were souls were at stake. Countless other Christians were persecuted and even martyred because they refused to offer any worship to Caesar. Daniel was thrown into the Lions Den. Shadrach, Meshach, and

Abednego went to the fiery furnace rather than bow down and worship an image of the king. And we could go on. There *are* times when the Christian must and should disobey the civil authorities, because obeying them would be sinful. And as been proclaimed, when there are cases of persecution the resistance is to be peaceful. We cannot parse each case here today, but this is the principle: we are to submit to the governing authorities except when doing so would cause us to sin.

Perhaps we can think of it in relation to another doctrine: marriage. God's intention is that marriage be an eternal covenant between a man and a woman for life. In Malachi 2:16 the Lord directly says, "I hate divorce". And as we have seen in the Scripture today God's intention is that His people are law-abiding citizens of the state and if they are not they are in fact challenging God's authority. These are both clear principles. However, in both of these cases there are exceptions that are clearly laid out in Scripture (spirit of the law vs. letter of the law). Note that this is not a *preference* issue based on wrong motivations. A man is not to abandon his wife simply because another woman is younger or prettier. Rather, divorce is permitted in cases of adultery and abandonment. A Christian is not to cheat on their taxes because they think the government wastes too much money. Rather disobedience to government is allowed only if the obedience would cause one to sin.

There is so much more that could be delved into with this topic, in relation to the two kingdoms and the intersection of Church and State. I have done a Bible Study on it before and the *Lutheran Hour* has a good study on it as well so perhaps we will revisit that at another time. But there is one other aspect to our text that I want to close with.

Verses 1-7 are the specific ones about submitting to the governing authorities and why this is the duty of the Christian. It is also good that the assigned reading for today includes verse 8-10. Because this takes us back to what he have heard in the previous Sundays as well. It tells us that the key to all of this is love. Not a sappy, sentimental, or permissive love that we see permeate the world, but the love of the God that is love. How do we not owe anyone anything and fulfill the law? Love is fulfillment of the Law. What I have been preaching about these four weeks really hones in on the Second Table of the Law, Commandments 4-10 and several of those are given to us in verse 9. And then it is brought home, as Jesus did, by saying, *“And any other commandment, are summed up in this word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”*

This is what Jesus has done. He has fulfilled the requirements of the Law perfectly, in love. So much so that He died for us. As His people we are called to love God above all else and love our neighbor as ourselves. If our decisions in terms of interacting and living with our brothers and sisters in the Church, those that oppose us, and under the authority of government are approached in this way we are going forth as God desires His people to live. The Christian is a citizen under the authority of God-instituted government. The Christian is a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Our citizenship in left-hand kingdom may not always be easy, but it is temporary. But our right hand eternal citizenship is in heaven. Thanks be to God.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.