

Pentecost 13, September 7, 2014

The Left Hand of God's Rule

Romans 13:1–10



Grace, mercy and peace from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The greatest gift that God has bestowed on us is His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, and the salvation He won for us on the cross. Through Christ's atoning sacrifice our sins have been forgiven, and through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts to take hold of this great treasure. Christ rules in our hearts and in his Church through the kingdom of God's right hand. But what about God's Left Hand? In spiritual matters we talk about two kingdoms, the Kingdom of the right which is the authority of church, faith and what is to come, and the kingdom of the left is the world and earthly government authority.

I. Our government is a great gift God has given us.

The government is a good gift God has given us, especially in developed countries, not so much in governments of developing countries though. Here we have received countless blessings, from our local, our provincial and federal governments. They provide police and fire protection, regulated utilities, due process of the law, roads and highways, public educational systems, welfare ... and the freedoms to enjoy them. We can elect our leaders, and we have the freedom to replace them or run for office ourselves if we want!

Generally speaking, if we obey the laws and stay out of trouble, government leaders, including the police, are our friends. Paul says in our text, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad . . . do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good" (vv 3–4). It's interesting that the Gospel writers don't record Jesus condemning, complaining, or criticizing the civil government—even though it would soon crucify him unjustly and level Jerusalem in less than forty years, he did call Herod a "fox" though to describe his character and personality.

It's even more remarkable that Paul wrote these words during the bloody reign of Nero and other likewise emperors including the terrible Caligula. He says here, "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" (v 1).

So, is Canada a Christian government? Not really! Although there is confusion in the separation of Church and State, after all the Queen remains the Head of State in Canada, and she is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, therefore the "protector of the faith" and a prayer was said in the House of Commons for the Queen for many years, therefore concluding that we are a Christian nation. And who remembers those Sundays from the past, people didn't work, they attended church, it is the Day of the Lord, and so respected it. Until the 1960s, most parts of Canada still had extensive Lord's Day laws that limited what one could do on a Sunday.

So yes we were a Christian Country, until 1982 when the Charter of Rights came in to place, which gave other religions equality to Christianity as it proved later on. Although it begins: "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law..."

The Charter of Rights in its section two guarantees "freedom of religion", which means that Canadians are free to practice their religions in a non-harmful fashion. But the courts have interpreted this to include a right to be free from religion which means that Canadians cannot be forced to adopt a religious practice. And there is a clause in it, clause 33 which allows the Federal or any Provincial government to opt-out of any portion of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which deals with: fundamental freedoms of religion, speech, the press, free assembly and association and the guarantee of equality. In other words, the Kingdom of the Right is ignored if this equality gets threatened. Since 1982, things have changed, and you know the rest of the story.

Although one thing that in some ways is a blessing even today, is the income tax deduction that you and I benefit from.

Even though our country is not Christian as it used to be, there are many Christians in Canada today, we are not a theocratic country, that's for sure! But that's ok, after all Luther had a good understanding of God's kingdom of his right hand and God's kingdom of his left hand, which came in part from a correct understanding of this chapter of Romans 13.

We're thankful to God that we live in a nation that still somewhat allows us to live as Christians without government interference and persecution, although we must remember that things are not going well for us, we are losing ground as a Christian nation and as a church in this increasing atheistic culture.

But despite that we give thanks to God because of what we have, and for reminding us that God rules through the government with his left hand, not his right hand! The governments of China, Indonesia, or even Iran are as much under God's left-hand kingdom as Canada, are they not? Because this is how God keeps law and order among the people of the world. Remember that God's rule for order in this land is through governments, that is God's left hand.

II. To disobey the government law is to disobey "an avenger who carries out God's wrath."

To disobey the government law is to disobey "an avenger who carries out God's wrath"—usually. We must obey the law . . . unless our government requires us to do something that is in direct contradiction to God's will in the Holy Scriptures. And then, like Peter and other apostles in Acts 5, we say, "We must obey God rather than men," and suffer the consequences of men.

Several times in my life I've been pulled over for speeding. It's nothing to be proud of, but I don't think that I have the record on that crime among pastors of our Synod.

Although I may have pleaded a degree of innocence or made some excuses when I was caught speeding I was guilty as charged each time.

I can't recall of ever receiving mercy from God's left hand. But that's ok, I know what I did is not right.

III. The government is God's servant to keep law and order, whether the one in authority believes or not.

The government is God's servant to keep law and order, whether the one in authority is a believer or not! Isaiah 45 mentions King Cyrus, the unbeliever, whom God

used to punish the Babylonians. He ruled much of the world—for a little while—as God’s chosen instrument. God conquered and ruled through pagan Cyrus.

Secular rulers and governments are God’s rule of his left hand and threaten punishment for wrongdoers! So do what is right! But again, we must stress, unless they ask you to do something which is against God’s word.

Conservative Lutheran Christians might claim to be law-abiding citizens for the most part, but we are confronted by the first use of the Law, the “curb” as we know it, more than we care to admit. Yes we are to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mt 22:21).

As I was caught speeding, I remember one case it was Good Friday, I wasn’t speeding too much, but... I was caught none the less, I remember I was tempted to explain that I was in a hurry doing the work of the Lord, and that it was Good Friday... I’m reminded of what the Apostle Paul said: “It is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.” And once we stretch our conscience a few times, it gets looser and looser.

And getting your conscience loose it can get you into more serious troubles. Paul states, “But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he [the government authority] 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” (v 4). Swords were used by the Roman government in the first century to cut things off—mostly heads—and they had the right to do it to keep law and order.

IV. God has given us the tremendous gift of the secular government and tells us to obey it.

God has given us the tremendous gift of the secular government to protect us, to care for us, and to provide for us—and he tells us to obey the government. Here in Romans 13, Paul says, “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” (v 7).

There are consequences for breaking the laws of the land, whether we get caught or not! And when we break those laws, and the government exercises its authority over us through punishment—whether they be fines, community service, jail time, prison, or execution—God’s right hand of grace and forgiveness will wash us clean as “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7). He paid the price on the cross of Calvary, and on our repentance declares us eternally “not guilty.”

The Roman government had a special form of execution reserved for the worst criminals: crucifixion. It was slow and excruciatingly painful and involved both the right and left hands of Jesus. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). It was this divine-human exchange, whereby he got our sin and we got his righteousness. And God is okay with that! Amen.