

BE SUBORDINATE TO GOVERNING AUTHORITIES
Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
Romans 13:1-10

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Second Reading from before, Romans 13:1-10: ¹ **Let everyone be subordinate to the governing authorities! For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist have been ordained by God.** ² **Therefore, he who refuses to subordinate himself to the authority resists God's ordinance, and those who resist it will bring judgment on themselves.** ³ **For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the governing authority? Do what is right, and it will praise you!** ⁴ **For it is God's servant for your benefit. However, if you do wrong, you should be afraid! For it does not bear the sword for nothing. It is God's servant, an avenger that is an agent of wrath to anyone who does wrong.** ⁵ **Therefore it is necessary to subordinate oneself, not only because of God's wrath, but also because of conscience.** ⁶ **For that is why you also pay taxes. For they are God's servants, who attend continually to this work.** ⁷ **Pay to all what you owe them! If you owe anyone tribute, pay tribute; if taxes, then taxes; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour!** ⁸ **Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another! For the person who loves the other person 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 whatever other Commandment there may be are summed up in this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself!"** ¹⁰ **Love does no harm to the neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the Law.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Paul had made the observation that **"there is no authority except from God."** Everyone and everything belong to God. He is the Creator; we are His creatures. He holds all authority. It is He and He alone who divides out authority to His representatives on earth as He sees fit. Because God has made the world and everything in it, He could rightly say to Adam and Eve, *"Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and bring it under your control! Rule over the fish in the sea, the flying creatures in the sky and over every kind of animal that crawls on the earth,"* (Genesis 1:28). God delegated His own authority to Adam and Eve when He put them in charge of His lower creatures.

In the same way, God has delegated certain aspects of His authority at various levels and in various areas to provide an ordered structure in human society. At its base, the Fourth Commandment deals with the authority God has given to those who represent Him here on earth.

Obviously, not everyone has the same area of responsibility. For example, parents have a different area of responsibility regarding their children than do their children's teachers in school, but both are God's representatives and therefore deserve honour and respect as such in their areas of responsibility.

Paul, however, is not directing his remarks only, or even primarily, to children. Respect for authority is required of all. **"Let everyone be subordinate to the governing authorities!"** he says, **"For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist have been ordained by God."**

In the context in which Paul is writing, his directives to the Romans especially include respect for secular government. That is perhaps the more remarkable when we realise that in Paul's day the civil government of Rome was undoubtedly totally pagan. Nero was the Roman emperor - hardly a model of kind and benevolent leadership, and yet Paul says, **"Therefore, he who refuses to subordinate himself to the authority resists God's ordinance, and those who resist it will bring judgment on themselves."**

However, there are two reasons when we may disobey the authorities whom God has placed over us, only two reasons to break laws. One is if rulers call upon us to disobey God, and this is always a possibility: for authorities are given power in order to rule, and power always attracts *corruption.* Therefore, many rulers will use and abuse their

authority for personal gain. This is especially dangerous for rulers, because God has entrusted to them the sword; and history is full of rulers who have abused force, violence and bloodshed to destroy their opponents, invade, plunder and kill. Sometimes, they have set out exclusively to silence the Gospel. We see this in the case where the council of Pharisees told the apostles to cease speaking of Jesus, and Peter responded, “*We must obey God rather than men,*” (Acts 5:29). They disobeyed authorities in order to obey God. In fact, many early Christians were put to death by rulers because they refused to deny Jesus as their Saviour. But, as one early Christian by the name of Tertullian observed, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”¹ The early Church grew in spite of martyrdom, or perhaps because of it: observers took notice that Christians didn’t raise a sword against their persecutors, for God hadn’t given them that sword to raise. Instead, Christians wielded the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God - proclaiming Christ crucified and trusting that they would be raised from the dead by His grace. We always do well to remember that the Church does not grow by power, be it the force of violence or the power of human persuasion. No, it grows by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Whether we have good leaders or bad in authority, as citizens, we have the responsibility to be subordinate to the authorities. How? For one thing, we respond to their authority with good conduct: we follow the laws of the land so as not to make the authorities’ job harder. This is in service to both rulers and our neighbours around us. As Paul says, “**Pay to all what you owe them! If you owe anyone tribute, pay tribute; if taxes, then taxes; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour!**” That’s part of our office of “citizen.”

The other reason that you might disobey authorities and laws is if the law prevents you from loving your neighbour. As Paul writes, “**Love does no harm to the neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the Law.**”

We are at a difficult period in time that has seen restrictions placed by the authorities not only on business and even in one’s own home, but also on places of worship. We have been directed as to how many people may gather together, and how to keep our distance from each other. Whether one agrees with the real motives of what has been implemented or not, that is beside the point. We would trust that the reason for authorities to lockdown parts of the country is for the well-being and protection of its citizens, and so, as long as restrictions are implemented and is not leading to a full shutdown of the preaching of the Gospel, we obey. As Christians, we listen to the words “**Love does no harm to the neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the Law,**” and so, we do need to keep in mind the safety of others, especially the more vulnerable in the community. If we are asked not to gather, we still have means such as online services, as a way to hear the Word of God, and we can still gather together in our families around the Word.

However, if the authorities insisted that we were to cease worship for an indefinite period, with no apparent reason other than to stop the preaching of the Gospel, then we would need to disobey, because they are not acting with love to the neighbour. If we were to see a blatant attack develop on the church then, with respect to them, we must say, “*We must obey God rather than men.*” They can wield the sword, but remember who promises to raise you from the dead.

At any rate, two points we can make is that rulers are put in position by God to keep order for our good, and the other is that we owe them obedience and honour, and may only disobey them out of obedience to God or love for our neighbour.

Today, we are living in angry, cynical times. We are troubled by what’s happening not only in our own backyard but all around the world. Apart from the present pandemic that keeps rearing its ugly head, there are threats made between nations, and terrorism still exists. But not only this, news reports detail scandal after scandal among politicians, substituting with rumour when the day is slow. There’s little trust in elected officials, and lots of calls to “throw them all out.” Political debate is reduced to name-calling and mudslinging.

Now, surely none of us are naïve. We are aware of corruption and trouble in government. We know about immorality among politicians, both in their flaunted personal lives and in some of the legislation they try to propose. As citizens, we’ve got a few opinions, and we do have the right to be heard, and the right to vote. Nevertheless, “**Let everyone be subordinate to the governing authorities! For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist have been ordained by God.**” This does not mean we have to agree with all their policies, but

¹ Apologeticus, L.13, written in Carthage in the summer or autumn of AD 197

we must exercise Christian care in how we treat those placed in authority. We are tempted to be angry that the police officer is pointing the radar gun in our direction when we're in a 60 zone, running late. We'll think bad of those who send a bill for tax that has to be paid. We'll find it easy to hold elected officials in contempt, since that is the spirit of the age; and we'll find that glee comes easy when a politician we don't care for suffers a setback. These are the times in which we live.

But this is not just about human contests for power. To be angry at one in authority is to be angry at one whom God has placed there for our well-being. To wish evil on one in authority is to wish evil on God's servant for our good. To hold them in contempt or to be gleeful at their downfall is to rejoice in the downfall of God's instrument.

Whether we agree with them or not, we must pray for these authorities. Pray that they would resist temptation and act with integrity. Pray that they would repent of positions which contradict Scripture and act in ways that fulfil the law of love for those whom they serve. Pray also that they and their families may be spared trouble and trial. Their failures and sins are no excuse for any of us to disobey God's Word.

And where we find the laws of the land to be inconvenient and disagreeable, keep them anyway. If we have the ability to drive faster than the speed limit, good for you; but don't let the pride be an excuse to disobey. If we can make better use of our tax money than the government can, good for you; but don't let that be an excuse to violate the law. For such sins, even sins of thought, we need to repent. They are sins against those whom God has appointed for our good; and thus they are sins against God.

All this may sound crazy, because we set high standards for God's representatives in the Church, in the kingdom of the right hand. If pastors are guilty of the same actions as many politicians, we rightly remove them. But we are speaking of the kingdom of the left, for governing this world; and God in His wisdom appoints an interesting collection, many of whom choose to reject the responsibility and abuse the office. As we mentioned earlier, Nero was ruling the Roman Empire when Paul wrote this epistle. Nero was an evil tyrant if ever there was one - and one who martyred Christians in all sorts of gruesome ways. Yet what did Paul write? Be subordinate, pay taxes, and give honour. Nero was placed there by God, though his evil was his own doing - not the Lord's. Yet Paul, by the inspiration of God, commanded honour.

And who issued the death sentence on no less than Jesus? A weasely Roman ruler named Pontius Pilate; yet Jesus, the all-powerful Son of God, acknowledged that Pilate was put in that office by God and submitted Himself to Pilate's authority.² And what did Pilate do with his authority? He unjustly put the Son of God to death on the cross. But rather than draw His sword, the Son of God said "Amen" and suffered death, a death that is our salvation. Despite the weasely evil of man, God used this for our redemption. Christ Jesus bore our sins to the cross and died with them there, so that we might have everlasting life.³ In this, we rejoice.

The authorities (and we too) of this world are fallen sinners, subject to failure and unable to keep even the promises they mean to. Jesus Christ, our eternal king, is without sin. He promises to us that He will deliver us, and He keeps His promises.

While the criticism of many authorities today is that they are out of touch, it is not so with our Saviour. He is in the midst of us today by His Word and His Sacraments. He does not come into our midst to collect taxes, but to give us grace by His Word of Holy Absolution, to give us His very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. He does not come to us with power and sword to give orders and say, "*If you obey these laws, then you can be My people.*" He comes in grace and says, "*I have obeyed the laws for you where you could not; and by My obedience and My death I have made you My people.*"

Where many rulers fall prey to the temptation of believing that they exert power over others for personal gain, the Son of Man - the King of Kings! - continues to serve us with grace and mercy, even as He came in the flesh not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.⁴

² John 19:11

³ John 3:16

⁴ Matthew 20:28

Because He has given His life as a ransom for us, our sins are forgiven and the kingdom of heaven belongs to us. There are no term limits on our Saviour, imposed either by man or mortality. As long as we are on this earth, He appoints rulers to keep order and punish evil, some of whom will do better than others. For these we pray, and to these we accord the honour due. But no matter what happens in this world, we know this world is not the end. The kingdom of heaven is ours forever because we have been forgiven for all of our sins. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, heavenly Father, You have raised from death the Lord Jesus, our great Shepherd, because His death fulfilled Your eternal covenant to save us from sin. We praise You for Your marvellous love and goodness, and pray that You would give us everything we need to know and do Your will, and to live to Your honour and praise. Come into our lives with the power of Your Holy Spirit. Renew in us a true and living faith in Jesus Christ Your Son, so that we may be completely united with Him, trusting not in our own goodness, but in the righteousness based on His death for us.

Keep us from fearing, loving, and trusting anyone or anything more than You. Fill us with love for You, which expresses itself in humble, loving service to our neighbours. Help us to act justly, to love mercy, and to live humbly before You, our God. Move us to show respect to everybody, to be generous to the needy, to share the burdens of the weak, and to act in sincere love to all people. Help us to pattern our lives on Jesus Christ. Make our words sincere and edifying, our lives pure and godly, and our relationships with others peaceful and harmonious.

Make Your Church so aware of Your countless blessings, especially the gift of the Gospel, that it may continually respond with thanks and praise. Inspire Your people to proclaim Christ's saving love to all man-kind. Give pastors a true understanding of Your Word. Give wise judgment to those in positions of leadership. Give us all a loving compassion to people in need.

Bless our country and its people, that mercy, truth, uprightness, and peace may be evident everywhere. Give us leaders whose concern is not to serve personal pride or party loyalties, but to be Your instruments of service to all. Remind them at all times of the position of power they have been given, and to use this power for the benefit of the nation.

Fill our homes with the joy of Your presence. Inspire parents with the Spirit of Christ, so that they may encourage their children by word and example to live godly lives and to find joy in serving You and their fellowmen.

Bless all good and useful employment. Give to all both satisfaction in what they do and a fair reward for their efforts. Teach people in all situations to remember that they are accountable to You for every word and action.

Look with pity on those who are facing trouble and trials, especially those Christians who are suffering for the sake of their faith. Strengthen all the needy by Your mighty power, that they may remember that You are their only Saviour and help. Continue to keep watch over the doctors and nurses and all others, as they treat those infected with covid-19, and bring a swift end to the pandemic.

Hear our prayers for Jesus' sake, O Lord, that we may praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)

Ezekiel 33:7-9

⁷ "As for you, son of man, I have appointed you as a watchman for the family of Israel. You shall listen to what I say and give them a warning from Me! ⁸ When I tell a wicked person, 'You wicked person, you will certainly die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked person to turn from his way, that wicked person will die in his wickedness, but I shall hold you responsible for his death. ⁹ However, if you warn a wicked person to turn from his way, and he has not

turned from his way, he will die because of his sin. However, you yourself will have saved your own life.

Romans 13:1-10

¹ Let everyone be subordinate to the governing authorities! For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist have been ordained by God. ² Therefore, he who refuses to subordinate himself to the authority resists God's ordinance, and those who resist it will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from

fear of the governing authority? Do what is right, and it will praise you! ⁴ For it is God's servant for your benefit. However, if you do wrong, you should be afraid! For it does not bear the sword for nothing. It is God's servant, an avenger that is an agent of wrath to anyone who does wrong. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to subordinate oneself, not only because of God's wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶ For that is why you also pay taxes. For they are God's servants, who attend continually to this work. ⁷ Pay to all what you owe them! If you owe anyone tribute, pay tribute; if taxes, then taxes; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour!

⁸ Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another! For the person who loves the other person 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 whatever other Commandment there may be are summed up in this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself!" ¹⁰ Love does no harm to the neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the Law.

Matthew 18:1-20

¹ At that hour the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

² He called a little child to Him and set him among them. ³ He said, "Truly, I tell you, unless you are converted and become like little children, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, ⁵ and whoever welcomes one child like this in My name welcomes Me.

⁶ "Nevertheless, if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him that a large millstone were hung around his neck and that he were drowned in the deepest part of the sea. ⁷ How terrible for the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Things that cause people to sin must come, but how terrible for the person through whom the cause for others to sin comes! ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away from yourself! It is better for you to go into life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away from yourself! It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hellfire. ¹⁰ Be careful that you do not despise one of these little ones!

For I tell you that their angels in heaven are always looking at the face of My Father, who is in heaven.

¹² "What do you think? If a man acquires a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that is going astray? ¹³ If he happens to find it, truly, I tell you that he rejoices more about it than about the ninety-nine that have not gone astray. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven does not want one of these little ones to be lost.

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and point out his sin to him when you are alone with him! If he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ However, if he will not listen, take one or two others with you so that you have two or three witnesses to verify every word! ¹⁷ If he will not listen to them, tell it to the church! However, if he will not listen even to the church, treat him like a heathen and a tax-collector! ¹⁸ Truly, I tell you, whatever you tie up on earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven.

¹⁹ "Again I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about anything at all that they ask, My Father in heaven will do it for them. ²⁰ For where two or three have come together in My name, there I am among them."