

When it comes to loving our neighbor, we find ourselves in the midst of the Second Table of God's Law, Commandments 4-10, which Paul summarizes in our text. Imagine that you're one of the recipients of Paul's letter back in the winter of 58 A.D. Your "neighbors" are the ones who are maligning, persecuting, and ridiculing you because you follow that "Jewish slave," Jesus. And it won't be long before these "neighbors" of yours will be standing in the Colosseum grandstand as they cheer your loved ones being mauled and murdered by bloodthirsty beasts. And yet God's command hasn't deviated: **"Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor."** You see, that's the "debt" we owe, the obligation we want to carry out because, when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, when we were on the road to hell, when we were God's arch enemies, he had mercy on us, he loved us, and he saved us.

History records that many Christians in Rome died at the hands of their "neighbors" and the government without rebelling. We hear of no civil disobedience. We're told of no destruction of public property or idol statues. We see no rising up in arms against a pagan and persecuting government. To the end, because of their willing obedience, God's people were **"the salt of the earth"** and **"the light of the world" (Mt 5:13, 14)**, just as Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount. Unless they were commanded to disobey God—**"We must obey God rather than human beings" (Ac 5:29)** is the way Peter put it—this was the debt of love they freely and willingly paid—all in view of God's mercy.

So, here we are, citizens of God's kingdom, living in an unbelieving world, flanked on every side by unbelieving neighbors, ruled by a government that doesn't necessarily look to God for wisdom and guidance. We're often frustrated—and occasionally sickened—by decisions and decrees handed down from above. I know because I experience the same things that you do. I know because I'm faced with making the same difficult decisions that you are. We really are all in this together. But I know, and you know, who's sitting on heaven's throne, and that he's ruling and governing all things for the good of his people. We know that God has established all earthly authority for our good—putting his representatives in place to stand in for him. We know that he loved us and saved us, even when we were his enemies. We know Jesus' words: **"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16)**. And we have Jesus' promise to be with us always, loving us, guiding us, and protecting us as we live according to his will. **"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (He 13:5)**, he says.

And so, fellow redeemed, in view of God's mercy, we obey. We obey in reverence, not because our government demands it, not because of official orders and governor's mandates, but because we've experienced the freedom that God's forgiveness in Christ gives us. We obey because Jesus has freed us from a blind and pointless slavery to ourselves and has opened our hearts to showing the same love to others that he has shown to us. It's a debt of love we owe, a debt of love we freely give—to God's glory and for the spiritual and eternal good of souls for whom Jesus died. May God grant this to all of us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Romans 13:1-10 – St. Paul's, Muskego, WI – David M. Kuehl  
08/23/20 – *In View of God's Mercy* – 243 (1, 4, 5), 785 (1, 4, 5, 6), 617 (1, 3)

Well, we find ourselves hip-deep in the middle of it, don't we? All the posturing and rhetoric that come with politics, especially in a presidential election year. This past week it was the Democrats meeting virtually here in Milwaukee and the week ahead it'll be the Republicans in Charlotte, North Carolina. I'm aware of the old adage, *There are two things you don't talk about in mixed company—religion and politics*, but I'm going to violate this so-called "sacred rule," because God's words to us today leave me no choice. I'm going to talk about both, God's religion and God's politics, and I'm going to do so with our general theme in mind, *In View of God's Mercy*.

Paul teaches us an important civics lesson today and, if you know your world history, you'll recall that the government of Paul's day was totally pagan. In fact, if this letter was written in 58 A.D., as we assume it was, then Nero would have been the Roman emperor, a man reputed to be insane. Did he really fiddle away as Rome burned to the ground? Nero was hardly a model of kind and benevolent leadership, a man concerned with the well-being of his citizens, and he certainly was no friend of Christianity. Paul's message to God's people then and to us today is simple and to the point:

#### **In View of God's Mercy, Obey in Reverence**

- 1. Submit to the governing authorities.**
- 2. Love your neighbor as yourself.**

1. Let me warm things up with a little survey. (You don't need to raise your hand. 😊)

- How many of you read the editorial page online or in the newspaper?
- How many of you read an editorial or listen to a political pundit only if he or she is someone with whom you agree?
- How many of you dread the onslaught of political commercials that flood the airwaves or the nonstop robocalls and texts you receive in an election year?
- How many of you feel that anyone who enters politics is ultimately contaminated because the whole political process is inherently corrupt? Or, to put it another way, how many of you would encourage your son or daughter to enter politics and would be proud of them if they did?

Unfortunately, we have a general mistrust of the government at any level, and that mistrust may be so strong that we begin to think that God himself is anti-government. That's not the picture the apostle paints for us today. Far from it. Paul states that God is completely and overwhelmingly pro-government. In fact, God has established the government. All government. Really? All authority? Even those who issue mask orders and mandate social distancing and dictate that we're safer at home? Even those? Yes, even those. Inspired by God the Holy Spirit, Paul says, **"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."**

Numerous Old Testament examples make this abundantly clear. The people of Israel were God's chosen people, people to whom God had promised great blessings in the Promised Land, people whom God called *"the apple of his eye" (Dt 32:10)*. Can you imagine their outrage when they were told that God was going to use the Assyrians to punish them? Can you imagine their anger when they heard Isaiah say, *"[God] lifts up a banner for the distant nations; he whistles for those at the ends of the earth. Here they come, swiftly and speedily!" (Is 5:26)?* Can you imagine the look on their faces as they see God whistling for the attention of the Assyrians? "Hey! Here they are. Over here." Through Jeremiah God said, *"I am going to destroy Daughter Zion, so beautiful and delicate" (Jr 6:2)*. Incredible! God was going to use the pagan powers of Assyria and Babylon, governments he himself established, to execute judgment on his people.

The New Testament is no different. How Jesus must have caught Pontius Pilate off guard as he stood silent before him at his trial. *"Do you refuse to speak to me?"* Pilate demanded. *"Don't you realize that I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"* And Jesus' response? *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (Jn 19:10, 11)*. The power and authority that Pilate wielded were only his because God had given them to him. And he, too, was a pagan and an ungodly man.

This truth of Scripture is clear. No matter who's in authority, whether it's the king of Judah or the king of Assyria, Nero of Rome or Pilate of Palestine; whether it's the President of the United States or the General Secretary of China, the governor of Wisconsin or the mayor of New York City; whether it's a monarchy or a dictatorship, a republic or a democracy—*"there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."*

But just as important as it is to recognize this biblical truth is to understand that God has a loving purpose in establishing authority, namely, to maintain peace and order in society. This was my big "aha" moment a while back. God wants to bless us through those who serve as his representatives, whether it's at home, at church, at school, at work, or in the government. Regarding these blessings that God bestows through government, Paul says, *"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 one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."*

You see, God has a very sober assessment of humanity. Some hold the starry-eyed opinion that we can be trusted to do the right thing and, therefore, the government isn't really needed. (Sort of like those who say basketball games can be played without referees, because the players can be trusted to be honest and call fouls on themselves. Come on!) God knows better. He knows how sinful we are and how by nature we'll always put ourselves first. That's why he establishes the government and gives it the authority it needs to keep us in our selfishness from tearing society apart.

On the other hand, governments can certainly botch their God-given responsibilities. The leaders of Old Testament Judah did. New Testament Rome botched things pretty badly, too. We think of Germany in WWII, or Russia, or China. The list is endless. Our own Supreme Court passes a law that legalizes the mass murderer of unborn babies. Politicians pad their pockets or promise the potential of "pork" bills that will curry favor with their constituents. Injustice and corruption in government won't go away until God brings the world to a screeching halt.

But the fact that governments botch their God-given responsibilities isn't the real reason why we resist their authority. We resist any authority because our sinful nature doesn't like to be held accountable to anyone. We don't like anyone telling us what to do, and that's exacerbated by our station in life, our political party, or our political viewpoint. But while God has established the government to keep our sinful impulses in check, he knows full well that the government can't change our sinful nature. He knows that the moment the law isn't watching we'll act in our own selfish interests. (We invented the radar detector, didn't we? 😊) While God certainly wants changed behavior, he's much more concerned with changed hearts.

2. Yes, God wants us, as Paul says, *"to give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."* This is what we give to those in authority and, when it comes to our neighbor, Paul adds, it's *"the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ...Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law."* In short, in view of his mercy, God wants us to submit to the authorities and love our neighbor as ourselves.

That's why he sent Jesus. Jesus came so that we might live under a different authority, the authority and power of God's sacrificial love demonstrated to us on the cross. Paul once wrote, *"Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor 5:14, 15)*. Instead of damning us to hell, which he had every reason and right to do, God had mercy on us and in the person of his Son went to hell for us. He took on himself the full burden of his law and suffered and died for all our sins against his representatives. Then he rose from the dead to guarantee our justification, our right standing with him. No more sneaking off to do our own thing when we think God isn't looking. Forgiven in Christ, we run to God as dearly loved children run to their dear father. We stand before him, bathed in his Son's blood and clothed in his perfection. We are perfect citizens in his kingdom, who gladly pay what we owe: the debt of obedience to our governing authorities and the debt of love to our neighbor.