

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Ninth Sunday after Trinity, August 5, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 575, 584, 578, 576, 54.

Lessons: Isaiah 9:6-7, Romans 13:1-7, Matthew 22:15-22.

Sermon Text: 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

“Submit” God tells us. But isn’t it hard to submit, or to honor those who seem to have no God-pleasing values? And yet Peter begins a lengthy section of his letter with the word “submit”. That command applies to all Christians, and Peter will go on to speak of submitting especially to governmental authority, of slaves or servants submitting to their masters, of wives submitting to their husbands, and of husbands being considerate of their wives.

The first verses of this book of the Bible speak of Christians being persecuted. Peter calls us strangers and aliens among the people of this world. He writes about his readers and their persecution and reminds them – and us – *“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”* 1 Peter 1:6. The Roman Emperor, Nero, was persecuting the Christian religion when Peter wrote this. And, of course, Nero’s representatives, called “governors” would have been enforcing what the emperor demanded. At a time when our own country is experiencing dissatisfaction with government, these words are especially timely for us.

Please listen carefully as God talks about government and our responsibility to

SUBMIT TO GOVERNMENT

- 1. It is God’s will to submit.**
- 2. Live as free men, not as libertines.**
- 3. Respect everyone: the brotherhood of believers, God, the King.**

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

History speaks of the “divine right” of kings. But some historians today speak of that idea that kings rule because of the will of God as an outdated, obsolete idea. But here is certainly Scriptural basis for that historical concept. To reject the king was to reject the one God had placed over you. God has placed our rulers over us. We have the benefit of God’s guiding of government; and we have all the benefits of government.

Even the Old Testament makes it clear that God rules over all kingdoms. No ruler exercises any control except as God permits. We read in Daniel 4:17: *“that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.”* Under normal circumstances the Christian is to be obedient to the law of the land. This does not mean that he is to obey regulations that are immoral or anti-Christian. In such cases it is his duty to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29)

God is the ultimate authority, the sovereign Lord over the universe. Any human authority is subject to the higher authority of God. Governmental authorities are seen as a part of the will of God for governing the ordinary life of people on the earth. It is God's will that human life be governed or directed in an orderly, just way. A government, or an official of the government, may do things that are most displeasing to God, but the function of government grows out of the will of God and is based upon the sovereign authority of God Himself.

And so Scripture says we are to submit **“to every authority instituted among men.”** We are to do it cheerfully, not reluctantly but as if we are serving the Lord, which we really are.

Submission is one of the greatest of Christian virtues but it is hard to do. Our sinful attitudes such as pride, selfishness, arrogance, and stubbornness don't like to bend or yield to someone else. It is especially hard for Christians who are being persecuted to have to submit to rulers they know are unjust but this pleases God who established and still stands behind all human authority. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake, because of the Lord.

No society is possible without leadership and some form of authority. In spite of the sinful corruption in any man-made governmental authority, God prefers that to anarchy. That is clear from Proverbs 24:21: ***“Fear the LORD and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious.”***

American Christians don't have a king to honor, but we do have a president, senators, representatives, judges, and a multitude of state and local officials. Although it is especially fashionable today for everyone from opposing candidates for an office to small children to ridicule elected officials; and although politics in any country is rarely free from some kind of scandal, we can exercise our faith by showing support for those who are trying to lead.

I think that all of us must admit our sinfulness when we bad-mouth those in authority, especially by the way we speak ill of them and do not support them. Unfortunately, politics in our nation seems to be taken over by what has been called “negative campaigning”, that is, saying evil about one's opponent and dragging up every possible or perceived negative thing about that candidate. That makes it hard for anyone, including Christians, to be supportive of the office. To submit to those in authority does not necessarily mean that we are approving of their wicked, Godless ways. In our nation we have the right to speak up without fear of imprisonment. And we can do so, but we must remember the eighth commandment: **“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. What does this mean?** We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way.” By involving ourselves with community projects and service, by informing ourselves on political issues and then voting, we show support for our government and honor the God who gave us our democracy. And it is worth noting that Christianity has existed under every form of government, and even flourished under some of the most oppressive.

The President, Congress and the United States, the Supreme Court, as the three highest powers in our land may take away all our rights and privileges. What then? We are still to submit and to honor them, for they are God's representatives. But we too often don't want to submit, or we complain about them, or reject laws they have put in place. Our sinful human nature often wants to set ourselves up over man-made laws, forgetting that they are usually put in place for the greater good and safety of the people AND that we have a responsibility to God to obey them. Even in such laws we can recognize law as a curb. It's not about how much we can get away with.

We must realize, however, that if the government tells us to do something contrary to what God tells us, we must put God's Word first. Acts 5:29 plainly tells us ***“We must obey God rather than men!”*** when there is such a conflict. And it is self-evident that Christians cannot be obedient to the government if it tries to extend its authority to spiritual matters, as when the council of the Jews made a demand of Peter and John: ***“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.’”*** (Acts 4:18-19) But we must be absolutely certain of what Scripture says before we decide to disobey government.

We learn submission from the grace of the gospel, whereas pride and the carnal mind only see causes for murmuring and discontent. Whatever the people in authority over us may be, yet the just power they have, must be submitted to and obeyed. As you heard in our epistle lesson, in the general course of human affairs, rulers are not a terror to honest, quiet, and good people, but to evil-doers. Such is the power of sin and corruption; that many will be kept back from crimes only by the fear of punishment.

“For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”

Christians are free men, free from the power of sin, death, the devil because of what Jesus Christ did for us. He redeemed us from the punishment of our sins so that we are free to live God-pleasing lives. Believe that and be saved eternally! The unbeliever, the non-Christians cannot, by nature, please God. Christians are free under God even if we are slaves, or imprisoned. We are free to enjoy eternal life. And so, because we are free, we are not to use our freedom as a cloak for evil: ***"not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God."*** (KJV)

Christians must strive in everything to behave rightly, that they do not make their liberty a cloak or covering for any wickedness or for the neglect of duty; but they must remember that they are servants of God. Here is the motive for the willing obedience of the Christian. Christians in this way, by cheerful obedience to the constituted authorities, will do more to silence the wrong ideas, the errors which foolish men hold with regard to the status of Christians in the state, than by entire books written in explanation of Christian beliefs.

Also in our days, when the unbelievers are mocking the otherworldliness of the true Christian religion and boldly declare that Christianity has proved a failure in coping with the special problems of our day, our most effective argument is to do our duty in good works, as citizens and as neighbors. We dare never change either our religion nor the means of grace given to us by God. Christians must remember that they are partakers of the wonderful freedom which the Son of God earned for them by His suffering and death. As free children of God we Christians will show that willing submission to which Peter here admonishes us. But no true believer will plead freedom from the Law as his excuse for not obeying the government, for not fulfilling the holy will of God in every possible way. He will not, under the pretense of standing fast ***"in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free"*** (Galatians 5:1), become guilty of sins and of various forms of wickedness. That would be a disgraceful abuse of the freedom to which Christ has called us. Paul echoes Peter in Galatians 5:13: ***"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."*** We are in the service of God. This is our highest boast, that we are not serving as unwilling slaves, but as servants, whose greatest delight it is to show the new spiritual life in works which will please our heavenly Father.

Luther wrote "a Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to no one; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." We are free in Christ. We are royal priests, sons and daughters of the most high King. But we are also servants and many Christians have also been slaves. We have powerful obligations to God, to our families, to our fellow Christians, to our communities and country, and even to unbelievers.

As such free men who serve God in willing obedience, Christians are glad to listen to and to obey God. Give honor to all; love the brotherhood; fear God; honor the king. To all their fellowmen the Christians are to give the honor which is due them in whatever position they hold in the state or in society. To all their brethren in the faith they should show that kind of love which is proper among children of the same heavenly Father. To God they should give fear and reverence. To the king, that is, to the duly constituted government, they will give the honor which is due according to the Fourth Commandment.

God here speaks of an active living out of a state of mind which is bound in loving obedience under the Word of God. When we show love toward fellow Christians, respect and honor God and honor the government, people are blessed by it, and the unbelievers around us see it too. What can even ignorant men say against us if we follow these injunctions? What accusation can they bring against us in any court of law if we live thus: honoring all men, in particular loving our brethren, fearing God in holy reverence, honoring the King?

Lord, help us daily to live such lives to your praise! Amen.