

Sunday, July 4, 2021 – The Ten Words – The Fourth Commandment
“Honoring Authority”

Exodus 20: 12; Romans 13: 1-7

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Partially adapted from CPR

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today marks a transition in our Ten Words series. We remain, always and only, on the firm bedrock of the fact that God saves His people Israel from slavery in Egypt, and us from slavery to sin, death and hell before He reveals in these commands what it is to live as His people.

And at the same time we are transitioning out of the First Great Commandment to love the Lord our God – that is, our relationship with God, and into the second command – love your neighbor as yourself. And the first of that second group is what we consider today: 12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

It is an accident – perhaps a happy one, but still an accident, that the timing of today’s sermon happened to fall on the Fourth of July. We learn a bedrock principle about all the commandments here today – there’s always more than meets the eye. If ever you find wiggle room for yourself to think that you follow any commandment perfectly, Jesus reminds us that whoever breaks just one little point of any commandment is guilty of breaking the whole thing. And in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus *intensifies* the commandments – you’ll hear that next week with murder and adultery – even if you haven’t literally murdered or cheated on your spouse you’re still a sinner in regard to God’s will in these areas. So too today – the words of the text speak of our honor for our fathers and mothers – but they apply to authorities in all areas of our lives – our parents and caregivers, our bosses and teachers, our pastors and elders, our law enforcement and elected officials. We can’t cover all that ground today – but since it’s the Fourth of July and we’re on the Fourth Commandment, we’ll zero in on our relationship with the government.

Our country is one that prides personal freedom and individuality. Authority is a suspicious word, if not an outright dirty one. Paul’s words hit us where we live. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” Here in the United States, we have mayors and city councils, township officials, county or parish administrators, governors and state legislatures, a president

and a congress. Add to this the judiciary, from city judges to the chief justice of the Supreme Court. We haven't even gotten to the various appointed bureaucrats, nor the assorted law-enforcement officers, constables, FBI agents, and all in-between.

Through Paul, the Holy Spirit reminds us that the offices these men and women hold have been instituted by God. Because God does not govern the world face-to-face—since that would destroy all of us sinful people—he established what we call his “left-hand rule,” his “kingdom of the left.” He waves his wrathful sword in the face of those who consider criminal activities, often scaring them into compliance (even if they don't agree or wish to cooperate). Others, more bold or more foolish, challenge this rule. They rob; they assault; they threaten and intimidate; they destroy property; sometimes they even kill. For them, God's sword is more than a threat. He authorizes ordinary people to take extraordinary means. These governing authorities are to forcefully use God's sword. Even the taking of another's life is condoned, so long as it is justly done in the carrying out of this office.

This is what Paul means when he says, “Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” It's not only the high-profile courtroom dramas where murderers and mass-murderers hear their fate. It's the little everyday things, like obeying that rectangular sign with a two digit number on the side of the road.

If we all did as we pleased, the chaos would be unimaginable. Either we would cower in our homes, slipping out only when necessary, or we would be out blowing through every stop sign with wanton disregard to the safety of everyone else around us. God's servants for your good don't want this to happen any more than you do.

Granted, there are times when government decisions seem ludicrous, even sinful. That's because government, like all creation, is tainted by sin. Strange projects are funded with taxes you've paid. Wars against people who never bothered you drain tax coffers you filled. Laws authorize or allow behavior that we think or know is sinful. That rectangular sign by the side of the road seems artificially slow, and you suppose it's to trip motorists into “speeding” at perfectly safe rates of speed. And while reasonable people can disagree on many things, I know that there are a ton of feelings in here this morning, all over the spectrum, on various city, county, state and federal mandates, directives and laws over the past 15 or so months.

Here's the rub. This goes for all authorities under the Fourth Commandment, from parents to presidents. So long as the government does not compel us to sin, then "it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." Remember that Paul was looking at a pagan, idolatrous Roman government as his example of authority. Already as he wrote this letter some areas faced government sanctioned persecution of Christians. However, Paul would appeal to this pagan government and its' Caesar. He wouldn't attempt a jailbreak, even if unjustly held for more than a year. He would bare his neck to the executioner's sword for the crimes of believing in Christ and spreading his Gospel. He would not obey the command to cease preaching Christ crucified but he would absolutely submit to the governing authorities.

Paul wasn't the only one. The martyrs' lists from the church's first few centuries show person after person who accepted arrest and conviction. They allowed sinful officials to exercise authority even when it meant death. They answered the summons to the stake, the cross, or the arena floor. Finally, among them all, Old and New Testament martyrs alike, stood the One Martyr Supreme to whom they all pointed—Jesus Christ. To this Jesus, the Father gave "all authority." Yet according to his human nature, as a subject of Rome and an Israelite, Jesus submitted to authorities. He bore witness of obedience—martyr means "witness"—witness of obedience to the Father and to divinely ordered authority.

Christ's perfect obedience, while an example for us, more importantly brings forgiveness for our imperfect, unwilling submission. He was charged the synagogue tax in Capernaum (Mt 17:24–27), which he paid (albeit through the miraculous finding of the coin in the fish). He submitted to the whole Law—moral, ceremonial, and civil—that he himself handed down on Sinai. He loved God with all his heart, mind, and soul. He loved his neighbor as himself. He allowed the authorities to arrest him. He endured the trial of the Jewish council, even if it was held in violation of its own laws. He humbled himself before Pilate, yet also reminded Pilate that even Rome only ruled by divine permission: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (Jn 19:11).

Satan gave Jesus ample opportunity to rebel against the authorities. Imagine him whispering in Jesus' ear, "You're in charge. You have the real authority. Show them who rules!" And that's exactly what Jesus did. He showed all who have eyes to see and ears to hear that his Father ruled. Jesus submitted

perfectly to his Father's will, obeying both direct divine command and the will of God exercised through human authority. In so doing, he who was tempted as we are yet remained "without sin" is able to "sympathize with our weaknesses." He paid for our weak, sinful disregard of authority.

From all eternity, the Son pledged unending allegiance to the Father. This unswerving loyalty Jesus then displayed also as a man, honoring earthly authority and obeying its laws. This perfect citizen of heaven and earth now confers citizenship rights on us. In Baptism, we have immigrated from the principality of Satan to the kingdom of Christ. As Christ taught his family and his followers, so he teaches us: The Father reigns supreme through his beloved Son.

"All authority in heaven and on earth" belongs to Jesus. All creation—believing or not, living or inanimate—is subject to his rule in the kingdom of power. Yet because we are forgiven through the blood of his Son, God blesses us also with citizenship in the kingdom of grace. While the intimidation of divine Law still terrifies us in our sin, the Gospel lovingly draws us closer to our Savior. This forgiveness of sins leads Christians into willing submission to the rule and will of Christ because we know that his rule is perfect and always for our good. He is the King who gave his life for his people. We also willingly "submit... to the governing authorities," because this is right and because it is for our good.

God grant you the wisdom to follow just rule and reject the sinful, the ability to pray for those in authority and to thank him daily for the benefits of government, whoever the office bearers might be, and the desire to use the freedom you now have—as a citizen of the United States and especially as a Christian—to live out your life in honor of Christ and in service of your neighbor. Likewise, the Lord give you courage to use this freedom to proclaim boldly Christ's rule over all and his forgiveness won for all. In Jesus' name, Amen.