

"Two Kingdoms"  
Romans 13:1-7

September 10, 2017

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

For many years, many people (if not most) in our country agreed that baseball was our national pastime. Now, some say this is no longer the case. But what has replaced it? Some might say football or some other sport has become our national pastime. But I disagree. Do you know what I think is now our new national pastime? Bashing our government. Just read the newspapers, watch the news on TV, listen to talk radio, or sample some of the various social media on the Internet (especially the comments section) and you will see. It's an all-out, no holds barred battle, either against the government by the people or, more often, various people against one another about the government.

What forms does this battle take? For some, it's merely bashing – very vitriolic bashing – but only bashing. This form of discourse usually takes on comments such as this, "I'm right and you're an idiot." Recently, the rhetoric has been bumped up quite a bit. Some people are actually rejecting the authority of the government. A popular phrase, often seen on posters, has been, "Not My President!" This attitude has been used to excuse coarse language and rude behavior. Some groups and individuals have taken it even further – calling for open rebellion against the government and disobedience of its laws.

What has caused all of this rude rhetoric? What is the justification for such bad behavior? Some claim bad government as a reason for and justification of any sort of crude speech and illegal behavior. If government is bad (which usually means doing something I disagree with), then I am free to do as I please and protesting it.

The same is true for another reason that is often given: the illegitimacy of the government. "I don't have to obey the government," they say, "because it is not a true government." Those disappointed by the last presidential election claim this. But it's nothing new. Who can forget the "hanging chads" of several years back? I'm sure the same question was raised in presidential elections of Nixon vs. Kennedy and perhaps even Truman vs. Dewey. Much violent, even illegal, activity was justified for this reason.

How does a Christian justify his position about the government? Can he or she speak against the government? Can he or she decide to ignore or disobey the government? Many Christians say scathing things against the government. Some even willfully disobey and actively rebel against the government. The reason that is usually given is this: "The government is a secular institution run by sinful, sometimes even pagan, human beings. I live in the kingdom of God and am responsible only to Him." Some may even feel uncomfortable that I'm bringing the subject up. Shouldn't we keep church and state separate? Is this a political lecture or a sermon? There just might be a misunderstanding of the relationship between the two.

We are pretty clear about the nature of the kingdom of God, as represented by the Church. The kingdom of God has been established by God and belongs to Him. It operates on the basis of the Word of God, the Holy Bible. It acts on the basis of the grace of God (the unmerited and undeserved love of God for sinners). It deals with sin and resolves it by forgiving it for the sake of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross and glorious resurrection from the dead.

What about “the state” (that is, the kingdom of this world)? Is it secular and does it stand in opposition to the kingdom of God? Are we free to disobey it because of that? That’s what we usually think. However, our text for today tells us something different. St. Paul writes, “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.” There are not separate institutions, one sacred and the other secular, or one of God and one of the devil. Rather, it is what Martin Luther called “the two kingdoms”. The kingdom of the right hand is the Church. The kingdom of the left hand is the State. Both are established by God and belong to God.

However, the State runs differently than the Church. The State operates on the basis of the Constitution and laws of the United States, not the Bible. It asks on the basis of justice (that is, what is good, right, and legal) and not mercy. It deals with good behavior by rewarding the one who does it. It deals with wrong behavior (that is, breaking the law) by punishing the lawbreaker. Paul Paul describes life in the kingdom of the left hand in a very cut and dried manner. He writes, “Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he 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.”

As Christians, we have a unique position. We live in both kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the State. What are we to do? Some have advocated blindly obeying every government about everything, such as the Nazi Third Reich. Others have advocated the freedom we have in Christ Jesus to reject and disobey any government, merely because we do not like or agree with them. What is the Biblical answer?

Paul writes that, as we live in “the kingdom of the left hand”, we are to “be subject to the governing authorities.” We are to respect and obey government, not only out of fear of punishment, Paul says, but also as a matter of conscience. This applies, not only to governments we like and agree with, but with all governments. Why? Because all governing authorities have been instituted by God. Paul writes, “therefore, whoever resists the authorities, resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

What about bad government? Are we duty-bound to be subject and obedient to governments which hurt us or persecute us? Many people might be tempted to say that we are not required to be subject and obedient to bad governments. However, in answering that question Biblically, we must remember who Paul was writing his

admonitions to: the Roman government. It was run by pagans who did not believe in the true God. And, although full-blown persecution of Christianity had not yet begun in Rome, there was already considerable opposition to it. Yet Paul commands the Christians to be subject to and obedient to the Roman government. We are to do the same, even if the government is incompetent or hurtful towards us.

If we think that is unfair or unjust, remember that, especially in a Democratic Republic like ours, the responsibility for bad government sometimes lies with us. We suffer because of the choices we have made. And sometimes we suffer because God is using government to discipline His people. There is plenty of biblical precedents for this. God used the King of Assyria to haul the people of Judah often to captivity. And, a few years later, He used the king of Babylon to do the same thing for the people of Judah.

There is one exception to that. When the Church was just beginning, after Jesus' ascension into heaven, the religious leaders and you and say is a and is wrong in a certain just you and a and teachers and is a verse in is a you are is a certain that Jesus lives that is a out you distribution sacraments and your will and are you a script is recently regarded as you and you a more free you and he leaders attempted to squash this new movement by forbidding the apostles to teach and preach in the name of Jesus. Although these leaders were instituted by God (in the "Kingdom of the right hand" to boot), Peter and the other disciples refused to honor their request or obey it. When questioned by the religious leaders about their disobedience, Peter stood up and said, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

In the same way, obedience to governing authorities, either in the kingdom of the right hand or the kingdom of the left hand is not absolute. When given the choice between obeying a clear command of God and a contradictory command of a human governing authority, you are not required to obey the governing authority. In fact, you are obligated to obey the clear command of God, even if it causes you trouble and suffering.

The most important aspect of life in two kingdoms is the outcome of that life. Life in the State (the kingdom of the left hand) is all about our effort and merit, justice and punishment. If you do what is right and obey the law, Paul says you will be rewarded. However, if you do what is wrong and disobey the law, you should be afraid because the State is God's servant to punish lawbreakers. The kingdom of the left hand can produce justice and stability and those are good things. However, it cannot provide us peace and assurance.

Life in the Church (the kingdom of the right hand) is much different. It is all about God's effort and merit, His mercy and forgiveness. If you do what is wrong and sin, you need not be afraid because the Church is God's servant to forgive sinners. Here, are the benefits of Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection are freely distributed to sinful people through the preaching of the Word, the pronouncing of the Holy Absolution, and the distribution of the Sacraments-Holy Baptism and the Supper of our Lord. Here, sins are washed away at the font, sins are declared forgiven by the

pastor speaking in place of Jesus, and faith is strengthened and encouraged by the body and blood of Jesus at the altar.

As Christians, we are not free to simply disregard and disobey the government by claiming our only obligation is to the kingdom of God. Nor are we free to contradict, in doctrine and in deed, the Word of God because of any requirements by the kingdom of the State. We are not to live in one or the other, but in bold at the same time . Since both kingdoms have been established by God and we are citizens of both kingdoms, we owe respect and obedience in both kingdoms according to each kingdoms place in the will of God. The State does not tell us how to worship God and be saved. The Church does not tell us how to govern the State and be happy citizens. We thank and praise God for the justice and order of the kingdom of the left hand. We thank and praise God for the mercy and forgiveness of the kingdom of the right hand. May He grant us wisdom, desire, and the ability to be good and responsible citizens in both kingdoms. Amen.