

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Lent is a season of repentance as we reflect on why our Lord died on the cross for us. But Lent is also about catechesis, because Lent is a catechetical season.

Tonight, we continue to make our way through the Christian “house rules” on how we deal with each other. These “house rules” serve as our groundwork on our Lutheran worldview of vocation. These vocations are the duties or responsibilities that we each owe to our neighbor.

As I said last week, first a word of warning: Luther’s intention in including the Table of Duties was to serve us as our guide – *the Third Use of the Law* – in how we ought to live in this world and what is our duty to one another. But as it always is, when the Law is at play, we often hear the Law as its Second Use – *mirror*, because the Law always accuses, but again, the primary use and focus of the Table of Duties is to encourage us as we live out our lives in the various vocations that God has placed you and I in.

Tonight, we will focus on the third of the Three Estates: government, as we consider the next two pairs in the Table of Duties: “Of Civil Government” and “Of Citizens.”

As we ponder this third estate, we are reminded that Christians are not anarchists. We believe that fallen man requires an earthly government. Luther, himself, has said that it is better to live under a tyrant than to live under an anarchy where there is no order, no predictability, and therefore no stability. So, the government has a claim on us.

Today is March 4. Besides the news in the Middle East, if you turn on your television or listen to the radio or podcast, or wander through Walmart, you are quickly reminded that it is tax season. It’s the most wonderful time of the year! Well, it is if you like numbers and filing and stress and seeing your money vanish.

Paying taxes is one of the most direct ways that we experience the topic of these two pairings from the Table of Duties that we consider tonight. On one hand, these pairings are very straightforward. But they also confront us with challenging questions – questions that the Christian faith answers in ways that are different from the fallen world.

Luther provides only one Scripture text for the topic “Of Civil Government” and it’s likely that’s all that we will need. In Romans 13(:1-4), St. Paul writes, ***“Let every person be subject to the government authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”***

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, St. Paul says in a straightforward manner that governing authorities have been instituted by God. God is the one who has provided them. And since God put them there, to resist the governing authority – *the civil government* – is to resist God Himself.

You see, the role of the civil government is simple. It is to restrain wrongdoing and is to maintain order. St. Paul adds, ***“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. 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 to carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer”*** (Romans 13:3-4). Paul, here, is describing the civil government as “God’s servant.”

Civil government exists for one reason and one reason only. Civil government exists because of sin. Civil government exists because it is the means God has established to restrain and control evil. Because when given a chance, sinners will do terrible things. That is why God established civil government.

Again, the government is God’s servant. But what about when the government rejects what God has commanded? The government can be in the wrong when it overreaches the authority of its estate. An example of this is if the civil government would command things that are contrary to God’s will, such as commanding how the Church worships, and to that, we will say, ***“We must obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5:29). And when that happens, we are called to suffer for the truth.

We must also remember that St. Paul wrote the Book of Romans during the reign of Roman Emperor Nero. So, if Christians were to be subject to Nero, an unstable man who had Christians burned as torches to light up the night, we are to be subject to all who are given the civil authority over us. Even with all his flaws, at least Nero kept order in the Roman Empire.

So, there is good reason why Luther included “good government” among the blessings of daily bread, because life without government is a frightening thing. Again, it is better to live under a tyrant than under an anarchy where there is no order.

But no government is free. It may appear that government is able to grow money from trees, but that money is paid for by our tax dollars. So, every government costs money. ***“Therefore,”*** Paul writes, ***“one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, ... Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed”*** (Romans 13:5-6a, 7). In saying this, St. Paul was only repeating what Jesus had taught in Mark 12:17: ***“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”***

So, like it or not, government is a great blessing from God. And its main vocation is to restrain sin. And so, Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:(1-3): ***“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior.”***

When you were baptized into Christ, you were made a part of the royal priesthood of God’s people. As part of this priestly service, our vocation is to pray. And this is what we do at each Divine Service as we pray for our civil authorities each week. But this vocation isn’t just limited to our time together in this space as we are to pray for God’s enlightening of our civil authorities as a part of our daily lives.

During this season of Lent, we follow our Lord as He makes His way to the cross and empty tomb. He goes to the cross as the perfect sacrifice for our sin. By His death, He has won for us forgiveness. By His bodily resurrection, He has won for us eternal life.

Civil government is a great blessing from God. It restrains sin and allows us to live in peace. Our vocation is to obey the government, pay our taxes and pray for those who govern us. Yet, when the government acts unjustly, or when it commands things that violate God's will, we are called to follow our Lord in entrusting ourselves to God in the midst of suffering. We do this knowing that all authorities have been instituted by God, who has given us forgiveness, life, and salvation through Jesus' blood and merit. Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +