

IN NOMINE JESU

Table of Duties: Citizens and Government

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The text for the sermon this evening is from the readings you've just heard.

The Table of Duties is a section in the catechism which guides Christians not just in how to behave, but also in who they are, their identity.

This week, we consider the section in the Table which talks about Government and citizens; How should each act with the other, and how does each relate to the other.

First, it is important to understand where the authority of government comes from. Is this something that comes from God? Or is this a completely man-made idea that you, as a free Christian, have no obligation to follow?

In our reading from Romans chapter 13, Paul describes the origin of the authority of Government. He writes this:

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.¹

With this verse and the other verses this evening, we are taught that the government is not just some imaginary authority that someone dreamt up one day. Instead, we learn that authority, whether it's a police officer, mayor, governor, or president, comes from God in the first place.

While we are citizens of heaven, and we have God for our High King, we do not have the freedom to shrug off all other authority. We are commanded by God to be subject to the authority that He has placed above us.

¹ Romans 13:1, ESV.

Well this obviously leads to the next question, “What about those evil authorities?” or “What about when someone in the government commands us to do something sinful?”

We live in an age where the threat of a government trying to force its people to sin is a present reality. In fact, there is not a single time in history where any earthly government was free of sin and corruption, as good as the leaders may have been.

So what should you do, as a Christian, when your government commands you to sin? You are supposed to honor the authority God placed above you, just like the 4th commandment states, so now what can you do?

The text from Romans continues, but it seems to assume that the rulers put over you will not try to make you sin. Paul writes this:

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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 who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.²

So every ruler is God’s servant for your good. Why is it then, that they command you to do evil?

When the government decides that you ought to teach your children that homosexuality is virtuous, that transgenderism is the way humanity was designed. When the government insists that you stop being sexist, and start letting women get ordained as pastors, or that God’s Word is “Hate Speech,” what then?

Are you still bound, as a Christian, to honor that authority?

² Romans 13:2-4, ESV.

Yes, again, all authority comes from God. To dishonor the authority of your government is to dishonor the One who granted your government authority over you.

This does not mean, however, that you have to go along with the sin of your leaders.

Again, earthly leaders have been sinful as long as sin existed on the earth. The expectation God has for you is that you will still honor these sinful men and women in charge of you, while at the same time you guard your heart to avoid sin and to honor God.

The passage from the Gospel of Matthew helps to lay out this balance better. Jesus says this:

Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”³

Jesus makes it clear here that even the most powerful earthly authorities do not exist in a vacuum. While Caesar is due what he has the right to claim according to his authority, God maintains His own higher authority.

Those of you who may be familiar with the military probably already grasp this idea of multiple authorities, even if you don't realize it.

The example I like to use is this: Let's say you're in the Army and you're a private, you're the bottom of the totem pole. You're Beetle Bailey.

Now Beetle Bailey has another soldier in authority over him. And we can call this soldier “Sargent Snorkel,” or just “Sarge” for short.

³ Matthew 22:19-21, ESV.

Sarge can order Beetle Bailey to scrub the latrines with a toothbrush, or fill sandbags, or any number of tasks. Since Sarge is in charge, Beetle Bailey has to follow the orders he is given, he has to respect his authority.

But what happens if Sarge gives Private Bailey an unlawful order? Sarge is not at the top of the totem pole, even though he is above Bailey. No, everything that Sarge does is under the authority of General Halftrack.

If Beetle Baily is given an order from Sarge that violates an order from General Halftrack, then he is ultimately accountable to that higher authority. He cannot fall back on the excuse that he was “just following orders” if he disobeys the guy who is really running the show.

You, as a Christian, are often going to be in a similar predicament. You are going to struggle with a boss, or an officer, or a government which will tell you to violate your conscience, and violate the commands of God.

While you continue to honor that they do have authority over you, you also answer to a higher authority; the highest authority.

If you have sinned because of a command from an authority, then repent. God is in charge, and His desire is not that you die with your sin, but rather He wants you to be forgiven.

On the other hand, if you have sinned because you did not honor an authority God placed over you, then repent. Again, all authority comes from God, and you honor God by honoring the leaders He puts in your life, no matter how righteous or how evil they are. Repent and be forgiven.

This is the balance a Christian is free to maintain. You are not bound to live just under the authority of earthly rulers, but rather you have been marked at your creation, and again in your baptism by a higher authority.

Before you were even born, God knew you and loved you. You were created in God’s image, you bear the image of God, you belong to Him, and He loves you.

You are free as a Christian to recall your baptism as well, you can recall that God's name was placed on you, further marking you as one of His own. In your baptism you were given to God, to be children of God, to have your sin washed away, and to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

Luther's Table of Duties helps to remind us where we stand. When you think about who you are as a citizen, or as a ruler, you are also free to remember who you are in relation to God.

Thanks be to God that no matter what sorts of government we may have ruling us from this earth, we have been blessed with a perfect government ruling us and ruling them from heaven.

**And now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**

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Psalm 22:27-31; Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-14, Matthew 22:15-22

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Soli Deo Gloria