

“High, real and dangerous.” Romans 13:1-10

“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. 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. Therefore, 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, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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.

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What do you think about our government? Yes, that’s my question! Is ours a good government? Is it bad? Is it average? In my not so long experience, it seems that we are never happy with our governments, regardless of where we live. But as we reflect on it in our Catechesis Class, there is something much worse than even the worst government. And that is... the absence of governing authority.

A few years ago, in a Bible Class I heard about this eye-witness story. He was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. When asked what the worst during his time in the camp was, he replied that the worst were three days when Nazis had fled the camp and the Soviets hadn’t arrived yet. When there was no governing authority. Just terrifying anarchy and chaos. No government...

Today we have for our meditation this reading from Paul’s letter to Christians in Rome. Great opportunity for us to reflect how we do think, and how we should think about governing authorities as Lutheran Christians. I will argue that we have **the highest view** on government, and we have **the most realistic view** on government, and that we have **a very dangerous view** on government. Let’s explore!

We, as Lutheran Christians, have the highest view on governing authorities. Yes, we do! We believe that governing authorities are nothing less than a wonderful gift of God. Already in Genesis 6 God Yahweh hands over His own divine authority to take human life to governing authorities to ensure that fallen humanity can live life where peace, order and justice reigns. Jesus, the Son of God, to whom all authority is given in

heaven and earth, confirms: **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”** [Matthew 22:21] Paul speaks about the same reality in his letter to Romans. He calls governing authorities God’s servants. God’s servants! That’s why the apostles repeatedly urge Christians to be subject to governing authorities.

For they are God’s servants. To punish evil and to reward good. They are much greater as a gift from our Creator than we usually give them credit. But as Christians we should at least be able to appreciate the magnitude of this gift.

For we know what kind of being we are. Sinful to our very hearts. With incredible potential for evil. Thus, this gift of God, governing authorities is the wall that guards peaceful and orderly lives from the chaos and terror that could be so easily unleashed. Governing authorities is how the Triune God not only punishes evil, but even before that, restrains and keeps it at bay.

Just imagine a world without 911. Where you are on your own. No one to call for help. No laws regulating our lives. No police. No justice system. Where everyone can do whatever their “good” hearts desire. How would you like such a world?

So, yes, governing authorities are a wonderful gift of our God. That is how our heavenly Father cares for you day in and day out. And as our Catechisms teach and explain it to us, all governing authorities have similar responsibilities as parents do.

For they are derived from the office of parents. That is how the 4th Commandment works on the scale of the entire society. That’s why in ancient times rulers were called fathers or mothers of their nations. Parents of their nation.

And if you remember the 4th Commandment is the only Commandment that comes with a promise. And what a wonderful promise it is: **“You shall honor your father and your mother so that it may be well with you, and you may live long upon the earth”**.

When governing authorities care for their citizens as good parents do for their children, and when citizens honor their governing authorities, those are blessed times for such nations. Times of peace and prosperity.

So, yes, the governing authorities are servants of God, God’s gifts, means by which the Triune God Himself cares for us. Therefore, we need to be grateful for this gift. As you see, we do, indeed, have the highest view on governing authorities. But...

We also have the most realistic view. Servants of God. Divine institution. Authority from God. The enforcers of God’s law. Our fellow human beings through whom God has chosen to work to bless us with order and peace and justice.

But... All those in positions of power have something else in common. They all are, without exception – sinners. Some have a better grasp of their imperfections; some are quite oblivious. And it is a well-known truth that power is the great corruptor. If you are an ordinary citizen, whatever evil or corrupt you may be, you can’t really do that

much damage. But if such a person happens to have much power, if they abuse the divine authority entrusted to them to govern us for the sake of peace and order, the result can be millions of dead. 20th century is in our recent memory. The bloodiest ever.

We do have the most realistic view on governing authorities. There is not and will never be an ideal government. As we reflected last Sunday, even if Jesus became our supreme Ruler, even He could not fix this world, even He could not fix us.

So, what do we do? As taught by the Lord who invented government, we are grateful for the institution of government, we pray for them, often and fervently, we support all the good things that any government does, we vote for those who seem decent people, we participate as much as we can according to our different vocations, we help to look for better solutions to improve our neighbours' life, etc.

But... we don't expect our governments to be our saviours, to fix everything. **"For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."** [Heb 13:14] For we have the most realistic view on government.

And finally, **we have the most dangerous view on governing authorities.** Yes, we do. What does that mean? How could that be? For we believe that governing authorities are God's gift, they are servants of God, we strive to support and pray for them and help them to work for the good of our neighbors, and we are subject to them.

How can our view be dangerous? Christians are not dangerous because of our very high view on government. We are not dangerous because the good Lord has sent us to love and serve, to forgive and bless and care, to protect and nourish, to build schools and hospitals and shelters and aged care facilities and countless other social institutions throughout millennia that have blessed millions and millions. No!

We are dangerous because of what we believe. **We believe that Jesus is the Lord.** Our view on governing authorities is dangerous exactly because we believe that they are God's gift, servants of the Triune God. Servants and not the ultimate authority.

Our translation says "be subject" to authorities. Ancient Greek word that Paul uses literally means "sub-ordinate" yourselves, or "order yourselves under", in other words, know your place, your vocation as citizens and act accordingly.

It doesn't mean unconditional obedience to whatever governing authorities may demand from their citizens, nor does it mean unquestionable loyalty to them. **Our ultimate allegiance belongs to the Lord Jesus.**

This conviction can be dangerous to governing authorities, especially if they want to act against the will of their Master, Triune God. When they want to disobey the will of the One, from whom all authority comes. How are we to act in such situations?

How are we to act if governing authorities tell us we can't worship, or that we can't pray for certain things, or that the institution of marriage can be something different than our Creator established it, or that men can be women and women men. What if

they tell us we cannot get jobs unless we embrace those anti-Christian ideologies, what if they force on us medical procedures where we may have good reasons to doubt will be good for our health. Or when governing authorities legalize and promote taking human life either in the mother's womb or because someone is sick or elderly or weak? [By the way, this way combined more than 100,000 lives are taken annually in Canada]. How are we to act? Who are Christians supposed to listen to?

We have wonderful examples both in the Bible and in the Church's history. Daniel and his friends. They were devoted to their governing authorities, but they refused to obey when God's servant commanded them to worship a false god.

Knowing that their disobedience may cost them life, this is how they responded: **"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."**

Apostles before the Sanhedrin, highest Jewish governing authority. When they were strictly charged not to speak and teach in Jesus' name, they kept doing exactly what the Lord had instructed them, and as the Holy Spirit led them. For they were convinced: **"We must obey God rather than men."** [Acts 5:29]

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, student of apostle John. When he was brought before governing authorities and commanded to deny Jesus and to confess that Caesar is the Lord, that the ultimate authority and allegiance belong to Caesar, he famously declared: **"Eighty and six years have I served [my Lord Jesus], and He never did me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"** He was executed.

We are to be respectfully subject to governing authorities, but **"we must obey God rather than men."** It also means to recognize that there may be consequences. That there may be a price to be paid for such disobedience.

Governing authorities of this world have a lot of power in this world. In this world, but that's it, and even that is limited. As Christians we know that what happens in this life is only the first set, not the whole game. Whoever appears to have control or win during this first set, it doesn't matter that much.

We know who wins the whole game. We know Him by name, Jesus. And He knows you and calls you by name. We know how much He cares for us. We know what He has prepared for those who love Him and remain faithful to Him.

In this sense we are dangerous, for the Spirit of God dwells in us, and we lead our lives waiting for the day when **"every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."** [Phil 2:10-11]

And that is how we think about governing authorities.

Amen.