

## God's Greater Story - Living in Mercy and Faithful Obedience

14<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 09/06/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 13:1-10 Pastor Keith Besel

v.1, **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God...”**.

### **Introduction**

⌘ I'm sure you've all heard this saying before: “All roads lead to Rome”. The early Christians to whom Paul wrote the Bible passages we consider today in Rome experienced this every day.

→ You see, Rome was the center of a massive set of roadways. All the roads spread outward from one single monument, erected by Caesar Augustus. It was the golden milestone, placed by the temple of Saturn. On that monument, Augustus listed the major cities of the empire and the distances to each one.

→ So, standing in Rome, before that monument, a person could see all that was included in the Roman Empire. Roads stretched up to the Wall of Britain. They ran alongside the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates rivers. All of these roads pointed to more than just travel. They spoke of the power of the entire empire.

→ Roman officials could be sent to any district in that system. And all of the military traffic only reinforced this sense of power and military might.

⌘ The figure of art we consider today; that we've placed inside the front of our bulletin (or Home Worship materials) today, stands there, along the Appian Way, looking off into the distance.

→ There's nothing about his features that would grab your attention. He looks like any other young Roman man; clean-shaven, wearing a toga, carrying a bucket of water, and holding a lamb around his neck. Yet, standing there along the Appian Way, this man draws our attention not to the ways of Rome and its military power but to the ways of God; to God's mercy and power.

→ This one figure is the monument, if you will; raised up, not by Augustus, but by God for all peoples. Through Him, one receives God's mercy. And in Him, one responds to the powers of this world. So, as we continue our sermon series in the Readings of Paul's letter to the Romans this morning, called, *God's Greater Story*, we will look at it through the eyes of this figure.

→ Through Him we see two things: 1) God's action of mercy and 2) we consider how He teaches us to respond to the various powers of this world.

### **I. God's Mercy in Jesus**

⌘ This figure of a young Roman shepherd is actually one of the earliest pieces of Christian art. It stands along the Appian Way. But it is not one of the memorials above ground that were sanctioned by Caesar. No, it is found underground, painted on the walls of the catacombs of St. Callixtus, which is a complex of tombs that reaches four levels down and 12 miles out.

→ If this figure were above ground, it would remind Rome of everyday life. But underground, among the early Christian dead, he offers a different vision.

→ By the time this figure was painted things had gotten even worse than they were when Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. Now, the full military power of Rome had turned against Christians so that they were typically slaughtered for sport.

⌘ However, as some things in Rome became darker for the Christians, other things became clearer. These early Christians, in the midst of persecution, began to paint figures on the walls

of their graves; showing their faith-filled vision of God's mercy and power. In this way, even in the darkness of the catacombs, they painted with the light of salvation.

→ They painted of the One power that saw and claimed these persecuted, killed and rejected Christian martyrs. Yes, this figure painted on a catacomb wall with a lamb across His shoulders, is none other than the great Shepherd of the sheep. This was how the early Roman Christians bore witness and retold the parable in our Gospel Reading this morning.

✘ Jesus is the Good Shepherd who sees His sheep suffering in Rome and He comes here to find them; to bind up their wounds, and gather them together, and give them the promise of life everlasting.

→ Taking them upon His shoulders, they know that He will raise them up and bring them to a new creation and joy that never ends. So it is, down in these mazes of death that the early Christians confessed Jesus to be just as He claimed in John 14:6; to be "the way, the truth, and the life". Only Jesus has come to save God's people from sin and call all people to follow Him.

✘ Look closely again at this painting. It doesn't attempt to give a realistic picture of Jesus. He's not shown as a bearded Palestinian. He has no halo; no wounds in His hands or side. No, he's pictured as a Roman; a young, clean-shaven, toga-wearing man who's carrying a lamb on His shoulders.

→ You see, the earliest Christians understood that the way you recognize Jesus is not by what He looks like but by what He does. He searches out and claims His people in love and promises to bring His people; His lambs into a new creation.

→ To the world, Jesus may not look like a ruler. But in the darkness of evil and death – that's where He reveals His power; His promise of eternal life; of a world without end. And the same is true today.

✘ Just look around you at our own world today. Crowds are not following Jesus. Rulers are not bending their knees before Him in worship. Yet Jesus still remains as the only Savior of the world.

→ Even though our world rejects Him as the promised Messiah; even though religious scholars question His sayings and spread doubt regarding the accounts of His resurrection; in spite of the academics claiming that those who follow Jesus are blind, foolish and even stupid – still Jesus comes for you and for me. Through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, Jesus opens wide to you the way of eternal life.

→ Buried with Him in baptism, Jesus raises you to new life in His kingdom and now leads you like a shepherd through the pathways of this world until that day when He returns to take you to your final home in heaven.

## II. God's Rule through Civil Authorities

✘ But as you walk down the roads of this life as a member of Christ's kingdom, how do you interact with the civil powers; with those earthly authorities that are all around you?

→ When the early Christians left the darkness of the catacombs and went out into the world, imagine how difficult it must have been to still believe in Jesus with all of the anti-Christian pressure they faced. Everywhere they went they were surrounded by the power and might of the Roman Empire.

→ How could you live in one world – the Roman Empire - knowing that you were a citizen of another – the Kingdom of God? That's the question Paul seeks to answer for us in our text

today. He tells us of God's Greater Story; His plan for you not only to live by His mercy, but also to honor His power.

- ✘ Paul teaches us here how God rules over all things, whether you're walking along the roads of Rome or the sidewalks of Ft. Lupton. Whenever and wherever and whatever road you walk, you live as a child of God in His mercy and you respect God's authority and power to rule over the world, sharing His love with all whom you meet.

- Paul wants the Roman Christians to see God's authority even behind the power of the Roman Empire. Yes, even as they were being abused and persecuted and killed for sport they were to respect the Roman rulers because, in some strange way, they were, as verse four says, "servants of God".

- ✘ When Paul wrote this letter, the emperor Nero publicized his rule as the dawn of a golden age. Yet, privately, rumor said that his mother poisoned Claudius, her husband and uncle in order to secure the throne for Nero. Nero even joked about the poisoning, saying that Claudius became a god by eating a mushroom; one laced with poison.

- While there were suspicions of assassination and conspiracy and a fearful use of power; Nero portrayed himself as one who promoted peace. Prophecies said that his reign was the dawn of the golden age. In one poem, a child comes in from working in the fields and stands before a sword hanging in his father's house and marvels at it, for in this "time of peace" he has no need to carry a sword. That was the public message, but in private, they talked about Nero with the darkest of fears.

- ✘ Imagine how difficult this was for Christians. How do you relate to the civil authorities when publicly they say one thing and privately they do another? How do you obey, as a Christian, when it seems like the rulers you're asked to obey are so obscured by propaganda that you never know the truth? Sound familiar? This question is just as relevant for us Christians today as it was for believers in Rome.

- Just look at our current political landscape. It poses a great struggle for us Christians. Many think the answer is to just refuse to have anything to do with politics. "They're all just a bunch of crooks" – how many of us have ever said or thought that before? Others simply withdraw from the political world; from the responsibilities they have as citizens, saying that politics are corrupt and then refusing to have anything to do with that world. Then there are those who want to use the political realm to recreate a supposed "Christian nation". Often though, they confuse God's gift of the church with the secular nations of the world, thinking that both have the same God-given roles. In this way they misuse God's Word as a means of earthly power rather than a means to salvation in Jesus Christ.

- ✘ Paul, however, teaches another way, about two kingdoms; two ways that God accomplishes His work in this world. Earlier in Romans, Paul recognized God's gift of the church. The church is the avenue whereby God proclaims salvation and gathers for Himself a flock of believers who share His message of salvation with the world.

- Now in today's Reading, Paul speaks of God's secondary kingdom as the gift of civil authority. We look to these earthly authorities and leaders, not for a proclamation of the Gospel but for the way that God rules for good in the world.

- You know, Paul could have spoken like any other propagandist. He could have argued for us to blindly obey rulers because of their character; because they showed mercy; or because they sheathed the sword in peace. But instead Paul anchors our Christian obedience not on something as temporary and fleeting as the person in office or the laws of the empire. No, he anchors obedience on the unchanging nature and power of God. Verse 1, "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 Paul turns the eyes of the early Christians away from Rome to God. We are to see the present authorities as what theologians call, “masks of God”; offices that God put in place to bring and maintain law and order in His Creation. Though Nero’s propaganda encouraged people to think he had sheathed his sword, Paul says in verse 4 that God has actually given him a sword that he does not bear “in vain”. Whether Nero believes or doesn’t believe in God, he is still a “servant of God” (v. 4); placed in authority for God’s purpose of order.

✘ Some who hold these offices test us as God’s people; driving us deeper and deeper into the experience of faith, so that we Christians continue to believe even in the midst of persecution; so that we confess Christ’s love even in the midst of a world of contempt. Others in government actually gave a public witness where they honor God by their words and seek to serve Him as best as they can.

→ But our relationship to these authorities is not based on the person but on God’s work. Through their position of authority, we see the power of God, establishing order for all the world. Verses 3-5 show that these government leaders have been given the power and call to restrain evil, protect the population and promote good. Sometimes they use it wisely. Other times they abuse their power and selfishly promote corruption and harm.

→ Yet the leader’s evil doesn’t diminish the office; the fact that God has established their position of authority not to save people but to care for them in public.

## Conclusion

✘ So Paul encourages us Christians to see how God desires to work through civil authorities; rewarding good, restraining evil and forming a society of peace, where His people of faith can gather for worship, proclaim His Word and serve others in love. He’s not saying that honor and respect should be given blindly and indiscriminately. Nor are we to follow rulers based upon political propaganda or a false dream of establishing an earthly kingdom for God.

→ No, we stand firm in the truth that God has established His kingdom only in Jesus Christ. Through the Gospel, He has called you into that kingdom and even when this world and Satan fight against it, that kingdom can never be taken away. Even when you “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4) your Shepherd, Jesus is with you! Only through Him do you live. In Him, you die. And, by Him, you will be raised to eternal life. Nothing can separate you or me from that assurance.

→ Yet as we walk through the streets of this world we know that God works in another realm. He established and He uses offices of authority to create civil order and foster public good. Power is recognized. Obedience is given; not blindly, but faithfully, as we seek to do good and honor these rulers as “ministers (servants) of God” (v. 6).

→ This is how God rules the world in power and His Church in mercy each day until He carries us to our eternal home. Amen.