**Placed for a Purpose – Sermon 3**

**“Living as God’s Child in the State” Romans 13:1-7**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus:

 When was the last time you heard something uplifting and encouraging concerning politics and government? It’s no secret that many people hold fiercely negative opinions concerning our politics and government. Corruption, partisanship, and power plays seem to make headlines on a daily basis. It’s such a discouraging mess that many Christians try to tune it out as much as possible.

 But do you know that government is good—a good and necessary gift from God? Ever since the fall into sin, God’s gift of government has been a necessary remedy for human depravity. The first and foremost function of government is to hold sin in check. That’s the primary point made by the Scriptures about the realm of life we’re exploring today.

 Last week we explored God’s gift of the church. Next week we’ll explore God’s gift of family. But today we’re talking God’s gift of government. This includes what happens at the state house, at the town hall, and in Washington, D.C. It includes everything that transpires between your house and your neighbor’s house. It includes all authorities in the civic realm: lawmakers, judges, law enforcement officers, all branches of government, all the way down to town councils and school boards—all things that have to do with politics and government.

 Today’s text is from Romans 13. It’s really a lesson in Christian civics—a primer on politics for the people of God. And, boy, do we need it. For whether you’re passionately partisan or fiercely independent, you’re not going to like everything you hear about government in Romans 13. These words remind us that we Christians are called to live in ways that don’t come naturally—to do things that aren’t pleasant (like paying taxes and submitting ourselves to the governing authorities). It’s not natural. It’s not easy. And you can’t do it without the help of God and the mind of Christ.

 Paul was writing to the Christians in Rome. And Rome, in those days, was the seat of government for most of the civilized world—a place where power and politics permeated every aspect of life. Hear these words from Romans 13:

*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. … 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 Gods 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 …*

 “Subjection” and “submission” are words that, by nature, we can’t stand to hear. That’s because the Old Adam inside each of us is a natural-born anarchist who recognizes no authority other than his own selfish ambitions. The same Old Adam who rebels against *God’s* laws is even quicker to thumb his nose at *human* laws. By nature we hate government. We hate rules and submission. Even as baptized believers, we can never completely rid ourselves of the rebel inside.

 This is precisely why God has given us the gift of government. And government *is* a gift. The God who gives clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children … and all we need to support this body and life—that God also gives government. According to the Catechism, good government is one of the things we ask for every time we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” When we pray that petition, Luther writes in the Large Catechism that we are asking God to endow our earthly rulers and government officials, “with wisdom, strength and prosperity to govern well and to be victorious over … all our enemies; to grant their subjects and the people … to live together in obedience, peace, and concord” (LC III, 77). It would seem that without good government, daily bread can be hard to come by.

 It turns out that government is a good gift from God, designed to keep order and peace, to protect us, to resolve disputes, and to curb the rebel inside all of us and keep us from infringing on our neighbor’s rights. Even if the whole world were church-going, Bible-believing Christians, we would still need a government to order and regulate our life together. That’s because we are both saints and sinners at the same time until we depart this world in peace.

 However, don’t expect too much from the government. The government isn’t God. Unlike God, our elected officials can’t be counted on to keep all their promises. Our earthly rulers are but God’s servants (whether they know it or not). Behind every parking ticket and every fine, behind every just verdict and court decision, behind every prison sentence stands the God of heaven and earth, punishing evildoers through our public servants (who are also servants of God).

 Our form of government is rather unique in the history of the world: *of the people, by the people, for the people*. There was nothing like it in the world when Paul wrote the book of Romans. At that time, Nero was the Roman Emperor. Late in his reign, Nero took to persecuting Christians to improve his poll numbers. Under Nero, Saint Paul was beheaded. Under Nero, Saint Peter was crucified. Nero was a master when it came to making martyrs. Yet somehow, mysteriously, Nero was also God’s servant.

 It’s important for us to remember that, even as we live—and especially as we live— in a much different situation. When our elected leaders abuse or misuse their God-given authority, we can peacefully get rid of them via the voting booth and put others in their place. However, whoever is elected is God’s servant—to do us good.

 We need to be reminded continually what the Biblical purpose of government is: to punish evil-doers and reward those who do good. We have to keep our expectations of government simple and Scriptural. God didn’t give government to save us—to bail us out of every crisis and every inconvenience. In fact, the Bible says, “Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation” (Ps. 146:3). The idolatry of government—making government into an idol, a false, phony god—let’s just say it always ends badly.

 So what does the Christian life look like with respect to the estate of government? It means that we pay taxes and revenue to whom it is due. Who would have thought that filing your Form 1040 is actually an expression of your faith in Jesus Christ? When we show respect and honor to our rulers, we’re showing respect and honor to God. When we dishonor and disrespect our governing authorities, we dishonor and disrespect God. As children of God, we also remember our rulers in prayer. And we regularly do that right here. We pray for our president, our governor, and all who rule over us. If we don’t pray for them, who will?

 Christians are always to be obedient to their rulers and laws, with only one exception (AC XVI:7). When the government forces or coerces us to sin—to act or to speak in ways contrary to God’s commandments—well, then we can only confess together with Peter and the apostles, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). An example of this is the March for Life in Washington. There, Christians from across our nation gather to proclaim that human life (including life in the womb) is a precious gift from God, and that abortion (even when sanctioned and supported by the government) is wrong. “We must obey God rather than men.”

 As a true man, Jesus taught us what it means to submit to the governing authorities. Jesus perfectly obeyed the laws of His land. He perfectly honored His mother and father—and every other authority placed over Him. Jesus rendered to Caesar what was Caesar’s. It was intrusive government and taxation that caused Mary and Joseph to journey to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who was Caesar’s local representative. God used it all—government, rulers, partisan politics—used it for the salvation of the world, for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus was executed by the state, along with two evildoers, bearing your sin, suffering your punishment, paying the penalty for your idolatry—a debt that you could never pay for yourself.

 Jesus didn’t try to change the world through government. Nor did He try to overthrow the government. We follow Jesus’ example. We’re not looking to build a Christian nation or to establish the kingdom of God on earth. That’s because we are *in the world* but not *of the world*. We live temporarily in this world as citizens of the United States. But at the same time, our permanent citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Jesus is preparing a place for you there with Him. We pray for our leaders here on earth, never forgetting that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and at His name every knee will one day bow (Phil. 2:10).

 We are but pilgrims here, on our way home, but not there yet. This country—this community—is our temporary home. We pray for it, participate in it, vote in its elections, honor and respect it, and pay our taxes. Christians are by definition good citizens—the very best. At the same time, we know that all the kingdoms of the world (including this one) will one day crumble. Governments will end, and all the rulers of the earth will be silenced before the crucified and risen king. His crown is of thorns. His throne is a cross. And His glorious kingdom is your eternal home. Amen.