

The greatest gift that God has ever given to humanity is His Son, Jesus Christ, and the eternal salvation He won for us on the cross. Through Jesus' atoning sacrifice our sins have been forgiven – blotted out forever! The guilt of every corrupt action, word, and thought that is an affront to others and an offense against God has been wiped clean from our ledger! Through Word and Sacrament, God the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts to **take hold** of this great treasure. Christ rules in our hearts and in His Church through what many theologians call “the kingdom of God's **right** hand.” But what about God's **left** hand?

Well, that leads us to what is perhaps the **second** greatest gift God has given us as His people, especially as we live out our lives as His people in America. I'm talking about the “devout and faithful rulers” and “good government” as Martin Luther describes it in the Small Catechism's explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer; “give us this day our daily bread.” Yes, as much as we the people tend to gripe and complain about our government and its leaders, this is actually the second greatest gift God has given to us as a whole. If you don't believe that, just live in a third-world country for a while. We have received **countless** blessings from our local government, our county government, and our state and federal governments. They provide police and fire protection, regulated utilities, due process of the law, roads and highways, public educational systems, welfare, Social Security, military protection ... and the freedom to enjoy them, spelled out in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. We can elect our leaders, and we have the freedom to replace them or run for office ourselves if we want!

In general, if we obey the laws and stay out of trouble, government leaders, including the police, are our friends. Paul says in our text, “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad ... do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good” (vv 3–4). I think it's interesting that the Gospel writers don't record Jesus condemning, complaining, or criticizing the civil government- even though it would soon crucify Him unjustly and then level the whole city of Jerusalem about 40 years later. It's even more remarkable that Paul wrote these words during the bloody reign of **Nero** and had lived through the reigns of Caesars Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius! He says here, “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” (v 1).

But what about us today? Does the United States have a **Christian** government? Although many of our Founding Fathers professed to be Christian, and there are millions of Christians living in America today, strictly speaking, we do not have a “Christian government”. We are not a theocracy. Luther had a good understanding of God’s kingdom of His right hand and God’s kingdom of His left hand, which came in part from a correct understanding of Romans 13.

Here’s an example to explain the point: There are some in America today who claim that the death penalty is a clear violation of God’s Commandment, “You shall not murder”. Those who claim this don’t see two kingdoms at all. In fact, if many had their way, America would be a theocracy the same way that it dabbled in theocratic governance about three hundred years ago. For example, for a while it was illegal to be a Roman Catholic in Massachusetts or to be Puritan in New Hampshire or to be a Quaker anywhere. And if you happened to live in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 or 1693 and had any unusual mannerisms or quirks, you might have been accused, tried, sentenced, and executed as a witch ... by the local **civil** magistrate.

My point is this: We should be extremely thankful to God that we live in a free nation, a great nation, (in my opinion, the greatest nation on earth!) where we are still **basically** allowed to live our lives as Christians without government interference and persecution. So, technically speaking, we don’t have a “Christian government,” and that’s okay because God most definitely rules through the **government**. He does it with His **left** hand, however not His **right** hand! The governments of China, Indonesia, or even Iran, though much different in structure, are as much under God’s left-hand kingdom as America!

To disobey the government law is to disobey “the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” We must obey the law ... **unless** our government requires us to do something that is in direct contradiction to God’s will in the Holy Scriptures. And then, like Peter and other apostles in Acts 5, we say, “We must obey God rather than men,” and suffer the consequences of men.

The government **is** God’s servant to keep law and order, whether the one in authority is a believer or not! Isaiah chapter 45 mentions King Cyrus, the unbeliever, whom God used to punish the Babylonians. He ruled much of the world- for a little while-as God’s chosen instrument. God conquered and ruled through pagan Cyrus.

Several years ago, there was a woman who lived for a time in Saudi Arabia. One day she borrowed her husband’s car to make a short run to a

grocery store, and she was T-boned by a ten-year-old boy who was speeding **recklessly** down an alley in his father's car. **She** received the ticket and a huge fine and was completely responsible for all the expenses because women were not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, and little boys can. That was the law of the land and she broke the law.

Secular rulers and governments **are** God's rule of his left hand and threaten punishment for wrongdoers! So do what is right!

We Lutheran Christians might claim to be law-abiding citizens for the most part, but when we are confronted by the **first** use of the Law, sometimes called a "curb", we bristle against it more than we care to admit it. And it's not just when we're tempted to make some time by driving over the speed limit.

In just a few short months, most of us will be completing our "good old" tax returns. It's a temptation for many, even Christians, to exaggerate a little on our returns by using some "creative figuring" in a sneaky attempt to avoid paying our fair share of the tax burden. I read how one Pastor tried to "write off" his family vacation to Disney World by claiming it as a "professional expense" because he put some religious tracts on the windshields of cars in the parking lot! But that's not being "thrifty", that's tax evasion! A violation of **both** God's right-hand and left-hand kingdoms! "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's", Jesus says. (Mt 22:21). Pay your taxes.

Another example: Say you're driving in the cities and find yourself running a little late for an appointment or for work, and so you zip through a traffic light that's "burnt orange." That's the color between yellow and red - and actually gets **blurred** because **you're traveling so fast**. That's not right either. The apostle Paul says, "It is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience." And once we **stretch** our conscience a few times, it gets **looser** and looser.

There are consequences for breaking the laws of those in secular authority. Paul states, "But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he (the government authority) 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" (v 4). Swords were used by the Roman government in the first century to **cut things off**- mostly heads- and they had the right to do it to keep law and order.

God has given us the tremendous gift of the secular government to protect us, to care for us, and to provide for us-and he tells us to obey the government. Here in Romans 13, Paul says, "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" (v 7). There are consequences for

breaking the laws of the land, whether we get caught or not! And when we break those laws, and the government exercises its **authority** over us through **punishment**- whether they be fines, community service, jail time, prison, or *execution*- God's **right** hand of grace and forgiveness will wash us clean as "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7). He paid the price on the cross of Calvary, and on our repentance declares us eternally "not guilty."

One final comment about the government during the time of Jesus and Paul: The Roman government had a special form of execution reserved for the worst criminals: crucifixion. It was slow and excruciatingly painful and involved both the **right** and **left** hands of Jesus. "For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). It was this divine-human exchange, where Jesus took our sin and we received His righteousness. And because of **that** God is well pleased with **you, now and forever! Amen.**