

Let Every Person Be Subject

In the name of him who was submissive to his parents in all things, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten meditations, we've been counting our way down the Ten Commandments. Last week we looked at the Fifth, the one that prohibits murder. In the course of that study, we saw that particular command is weightier than the others we've considered previously in this series. Protecting human life is more vital than protecting marriage, property, possessions, or reputation. Those things are important. We need to have them; but they don't do a person any good if they're not alive to enjoy them. In that sense, the Fifth Commandment takes precedence over the commands that follow it.

But if that's so, then the Fourth Commandment, to which we turn our attention to this evening, has even higher priority. Wait; what? Honoring parents takes precedence over protecting human life? Yes. And I'll tell you why: this is the commandment of God that establishes human authority. It's the one that provides order and structure in our lives. It's the command upon which all of the other commands of the second table of the law hang because it grants to certain individuals the rule of law and the right to enforce it. Without this commandment we'd live in chaos. No life would be safe, no marriage recognized, no property secure. Laws do no one any good if nobody has the authority to enforce them. Through this commandment the Lord grants legal authority to select persons and demands that we recognize and submit to them.

And in his divine wisdom, the Lord God grants the authority of law first and foremost to the people in charge of the most foundational and basic unit of human society: the nuclear family. He gives it to fathers and mothers to use over their children. He gives it to parents in order that they may lead their children, enforce discipline, reward or revoke privileges, and yes inflict corporal punishment as necessary.

Why? There are two reasons. First, because children need to be led and disciplined. Without correction, without teaching and training, without a guiding hand little sinners would grow up to become great big sinners: savage brutes who would commit crimes without conscience, with the result that the world wouldn't be a safe place for anyone. The second reason God grants this authority to parents is because in the family, they represent him. They participate with the Lord in his work of creation by bringing children into this world. And they are his agents to feed, clothe, shelter, care for, defend, and train them. Parents stand in the place of God for their children. And as such they are to be rendered due love, honor, and obedience as unto the Lord for it is he who placed them in their positions and gave them their authority.

From this authority that God grants to parents is derived all other human authority. Just as God appoints fathers and mothers to lead the families, so also he appoints rulers and governments to be his agents to exercise legal authority over larger social units like communities, counties, states, and nations. Originally these larger units consisted of extended families. There'd be clan leaders and tribal councils and so on; but everyone was related. In the course of history as city states and empires grew and came to include people from many tribes and races, some families eventually rose to positions of permanent dominance, leading to hereditary lines of monarchs. But all of these rulers derive their authority from God through the Fourth Commandment. They are, so to speak, the acting parents of their nations. And God grants them the authority of law for the same reason he grants it to parents: namely because

people need to be governed, and because rulers are to act as God's agents to enforce law and order, defend borders, make treaties, regulate trade, maintain and enhance public welfare, and all the rest of it. As such, we are to render to the leaders God appoints over us due honor, respect, and obedience. This is what Paul is saying in the reading from Romans. To resist our leaders, to dishonor them, or to rebel against them is to go against God. And those who do so will incur his judgment.

I hasten to add that we owe God's appointed authorities, be they parents or government leaders, our honor and obedience regardless of their relative quality or how well they perform their duties. The fact is that some parents are better than others. The same is true of government officials; some do what they do conscientiously and well and others are barely competent – maybe not even that. But no child or citizen gets to say, "Because you're not doing the job right, I don't have to submit to your authority." It doesn't work that way. I mean, it should be obvious: as long as God has decided to use sinful humans as his agents and endow them with legal authority, not one of them is going to be perfect. All will make mistakes of judgment. All will sometimes misuse their authority – either accidentally due to incomplete knowledge or misunderstanding, or due to selfishness and sin. It makes no difference. They still have the authority given to them by God and those under them must submit.

The reading from 2nd Samuel gives us an example of how badly things can go wrong when this commandment is violated. Absalom manages to break it in two ways: he's showing disrespect to his father, David, and actively trying to undermine the king's rule. Why? Absalom is bitterly resentful because of the way (Absalom believes) David mishandled a case of discipline within the family. Absalom's older half-brother committed a terrible sin; but it seemed David wasn't doing anything about it; not enough to satisfy Absalom anyway. So he usurped his father's parental authority, took the matter into his own hands, and murdered his half-brother. This led to a period of self-imposed exile because Absalom feared what David might do in response. But in time David's anger cooled and Absalom was allowed to return to Jerusalem.

That's where we find him in the reading we heard. Though he has his father's forgiveness – the same forgiveness he denied to his brother – Absalom is doing everything in his power to take the kingdom from David. With artificial friendliness and false humility he pretends to be personally interested in everyone who comes to the king to have their cases heard. "That's a solid case you've got there, and if I were king I'd see that you got justice; but as it is with my father on the throne, I can't see how you're going to win." And in this Absalom has an advantage. When David rules on cases, there are always going to be winners and losers. And the losers won't be happy. And sometimes neither party in a dispute is going to be happy with his ruling. But Absalom, who doesn't actually have to make any decisions, can tell everyone exactly what they want to hear. In this way we're told "Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel." When he thought he had enough support he launched a full scale rebellion against David, plunging the nation into a bloody civil war. It's a war that Absalom came very close to winning – but not close enough, what with the whole caught by the hair in the tree thing.

It's easy for us to see that Absalom's sins against the Fourth Commandment were particularly despicable. But it's the same thing we do as both children and citizens when we disobey, talk back to, or complain about those whom God has put in authority over us. Perhaps the most common form of this is when a decision or order comes down from above and we cry out in indignation, "That's not fair!" What we're doing is saying we'd be better off without those whom God has placed in charge. "Why, if I had their authority, I'd be doing it right." Which is easy to say because we speak from ignorance. We don't know what they know or what other things they are taking into consideration. Nor do we have their responsibilities. No one is

holding us accountable for the decisions. The burden of leadership is on them and they bear it alone. And yet we play armchair quarterback, presumptuously pretending that we'd do it better and wiser. And too, when we do something wrong or make a mistake, it's no big deal of course. But if one of our leaders sins or makes an honest mistake, well, then we lose all respect. Throw the bum out. We expect forgiveness from those over us; and yet we deny it to them.

Now, I need to issue a few words of correction here lest I be misunderstood. First, we understand that because parents and government leaders rule with authority granted by God, they are not to be obeyed if they exceed their authority. They do that if they order you to violate one or more of God's laws. If a parent tells a child to steal something or if the government tells us that we can't practice our Christian faith and speak about it to others, they are going beyond their authority. We must respectfully decline to comply and tell them why. We must obey God rather than men. And if we're punished for disobeying an unlawful order, then we can rejoice that we are joining Christ in his innocent suffering.

Second, it may be necessary at times to take God-given authority from those who abuse it. Parents who are excessively violent with their children or criminally negligent in providing for their needs must lose custody. Government officials who take bribes, corrupt justice, or engage in other criminal activities should be prosecuted like anyone else. And whole governments that engage their nations in wars of aggression, crimes against humanity, or genocide are to be overthrown from without and from within. But in all things allowed by God's Word, parents and leaders are to be obeyed.

Moving on, we need to look briefly at the flip side of this. I've already alluded to it, but parents and leaders both need to understand that their authority comes from God and they will be held accountable by him for how they exercise it. They are not autonomous dictators. They are God's servants placed in their positions for the good of those who are under them. They need to take that responsibility seriously, for God surely does.

Okay, returning to our obligations under the Fourth Commandment, we've looked at God's appointed authorities in family and government. But we need to remember that we are children of two families and citizens of two kingdoms. There's the church. And here too God has his appointed authorities. We call them pastors and teachers. I won't dwell on this because it may sound self-serving. Suffice it to say everything I've mentioned thus far applies also to God's servant leaders in the church.

Good. What I want to do now is take this down to the brass tacks. Why is it that we find it so hard to submit to those whom God places in authority over us? Why do children disobey their parents? Why do we resist the government and its rule? The short answer is that we are in rebellion against God. That's what sin is. We need to see when we disobey or dishonor parents and other appointed leaders, what we're really doing is showing our hatred of the Lord and his rule over us. And for this we need to repent.

And submit to God's authorities as we should. In this we have Jesus as the perfect example. Imagine how hard it must have been for him, being perfect, to submit to two parents who weren't. I mean, he'd see their mistakes, know their shortcomings, discover them sinning in what they said and did – he'd actually know that he could do their jobs better; but he never stopped even for a moment to love and cherish them, pray for them, support them, and obey them in all things.

But if that was hard for him, harder still was his submission to his heavenly Father when he prayed, "If it's possible, let this cup pass from me; but nevertheless not my will, but thine be done." That act of obedience took him to the horrors of the cross and to the grave. He obeyed because we don't. He became subject to death because we refuse to be subject to anyone. But by his submission he redeemed us from our sins. By his resurrection he raises us up as children of God and citizens of his kingdom. And by his Spirit he enables us to be subject to the authorities God places over us. We pray that he grants this to us that we may be found faithful children in both our families and loyal citizens of this nation and of God's kingdom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!