

Living in Mercy and Faithful Obedience

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God's Greater Story / Authority; Government; Mercy; Faithful; Obedience / Romans 13:1–10

› Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“All Roads lead to Rome.” I’m sure you have heard this common saying. It comes from a French fable by Jean de la Fontaine. What this writer once observed in the seventeenth century France is what early Christians experienced in first century Rome. “All roads lead to Rome.”

Rome was the center of a massive set of roadways. Marked with milestones, these roads spread outward from a single monument erected by Augustus: the golden milestone, placed by the temple of Saturn. On that monument, Augustus had listed the major cities of the empire and the distances to them. So, standing in Rome, before that monument, one could see the extent of the Roman Empire. Roman roads stretched outward. They went up to the Wall of Britain. They ran “alongside the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates.” And these roads spoke of more than travel. They spoke of power. The power of the empire. Roman officials could be sent to any district in that system and military traffic, camping along these roads, only reinforced this sense of power. Standing on a Roman road, one knew the Roman Empire’s extent and its vast military might.

So, he stands there, along the Appian Way, looking off into the distance. There is nothing about his features that would cause you to notice him. 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 along the Appian Way, the man draws our attention not the ways of Rome and its military power but to the ways of God, his mercy and power.

This one figure is the monument, if you will, raised up by God for all peoples. Through him, one receives God’s mercy, and, in him, one responds to the powers of the world. As we consider Paul’s letter to the Romans this morning, we will look at it through the eyes of this figure, seeing God’s action of mercy in Jesus and considering how he teaches us to respond to the powers of this world.

This figures of a young Roman shepherd is one of the earliest pieces of Christian art. It stands along the Appian Way. But not above ground. No, this figure is under ground, a fresco painted on the walls of the catacombs of St. Callixtus, a complex of tombs that reaches downward four levels and outward 12 miles. When above ground, this figure would call to mind the life of

Rome. But, when underground, where the earliest Christians buried their dead, he offers us a different vision.

The figure was painted years after Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome. And things had gotten worse, not better. The military power of Rome had turned against Christians. They were killed in persecution, slaughtered in sport. Somehow, however, as some things in Rome became darker for Christians, other things became clearer. These early Christians, suffering persecution, began painting figures on the walls of their graves. Clear visions of God's mercy and power. In the darkness of the catacombs, they painted with the light of salvation.

Here, in the tombs, the early Christians buried their martyrs, killed and cast off by the powers of this world. On the walls of these tombs, the early Christians painted their Savior, confessing the wonderful power of God. A power that saw and claimed the persecuted, the killed, the powerless, the rejected. This one Roman figure, with a lamb across his shoulders, is the great Shepherd of the sheep. This is how the early Roman Christians retold the parable in our gospel this morning.

Jesus sees their suffering 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 upon his shoulders, he will raise them up and bring them to a new creation and joy that never ends. Here, in the mazes of death, the early Christians confessed Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life. He is the one who has come to save God's people and he calls people to follow him.

When you look closely at this fresco, you notice something interesting. It does not attempt to offer a realistic picture of Jesus. You can't recognize Jesus in this figure. He is not a bearded Palestinian. He has no halo around his head. No wounds in his hands or side. No, in this picture, he's a Roman. A young-man, clean-shaven, wearing a toga, carrying a lamb on his shoulders. What the earliest Christians understood was that the way you recognize Jesus is not by what he looks like but by what he does. He claims his people in everlasting love and has promised to return and bring his people into a new creation. In the light of this world, Jesus may not look like a ruler but, in the darkness of death, he reveals his power, his promise of life everlasting and of a world without end. The same is true today.

Look around you today. Crowds are not following. In fact, they are following everything else. Rulers are not bending their knees before him. Yet he remains the Savior of the world. Though our world rejects him as the promised Messiah, though the religious scholars question his sayings and the accounts of his resurrection, though academics claim that his followers are blind, foolish, even stupid, still Jesus comes for you. He brings you into his kingdom. Buried with him in baptism, he raises you to new life, and, until that day when he returns, he will lead you like a shepherd through the pathways of this world. Yet how do you walk in the way of this kingdom. Particularly, how do you relate to the civil powers of this world?

Consider what happened when these early Christians left the darkness of the catacombs and went out into the world. Imagine how difficult it must have been to believe in Jesus and yet live in Rome. You come out of the catacombs and into the light. For miles and miles, you are surrounded by the roads of the Roman Empire. You live in the midst of its power and might. How do you live in this empire as a Christian? How could you live in one world knowing that you were citizen of another? That is the question Paul attempts to answer in our text for today. He reveals God's greater plan for you as you not only live by his mercy but also honor his power.

Paul learned this way from Jesus, in a blinding vision, on a Damascus Road. And now, in this letter, Paul shares this wisdom, to the earliest Christians in the heart of the empire. Paul offers words that reveal how God rules over all things. Whether you are walking along the roads of Rome or the streets of Barron, you live as a child of God. You respect God's authority, his power to rule over the world. And you rejoice in his mercy, as you share his acts of love with his world.

Paul encourages the Roman Christians to see God's authority behind the power of Rome. They were to respect Roman rulers not because they were powerful but because, in some strange way, they were servants of God.

At the time Paul wrote his letter, Nero publicized his rule as the dawn of the golden age. Yet, privately, there were rumors that his mother had poisoned Claudius, her husband and uncle, to secure the throne for her son. Nero himself joked about the poisoning, saying that Claudius became a god by eating a mushroom. A poisoned one. Why use a sword when a mushroom can work just as well? While there were suspicions of assassination and conspiracy and a fearful use of power, Nero pictured himself early on as one who promoted peace. When Seneca offered an essay to Nero on mercy, he celebrated the fact that Nero had sheathed his sword. 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 on his father's house and marvels at it. He does not need to carry a sword nor use on since this is a time of peace. What the public heard about Nero is that he had hidden his sword but privately what they whispered about Nero revealed their darkest fears.

Imagine the difficulty this posed to Christians. How do you relate to Civil Authorities when publicly they say one things and privately do another? How do you obey, as a Christian, when it seems like rulers you are asked to obey are obscured by propaganda so you never know the truth? The question is as relevant for Christians today as it was for Christians in Rome.

Look at our political landscape and the struggles of Christians. It's a heated election year. Some Christians refuse to have anything to do with politics. "They are all a bunch of crooks," some Christians say. They withdraw from the political world, from the responsibilities that they have in their vocation as citizens, because politics are corrupt and they don't want any thing to do with that world. Others want to use the political realm to create a Christian nation. Turning

away from God's gift of the Church, where God gathers his people through the proclamation of the Gospel, the turn to the nation, wanting the nation to take the place of the church, proclaiming the Gospel from political offices and enforcing God's Word through the power of the sword.

The Apostle, however, offers another way. Paul knows of two kingdoms, two ways in which God is at work in the world. Earlier in the letter, Paul recognized God's gift of the church. The church is the means whereby God proclaims salvation with the world. Now, Paul speaks of God's gift of civil authority...yes you heard me right, civil authority is a gift from God. One looks to such authorities not for a proclamation of the gospel, but for an enactment of God's good rule in the world.

Paul could have spoken like any other propagandist. He could have argued for obedience to rulers because of their character, because they showed mercy, or because they had sheathed the sword. But Paul anchors Christian obedience not on something temporary and fleeting as a person in office or the laws of the empire. No, Paul anchors obedience on something powerful and eternal as God.

Lutheran Service Book Three Year Lectionary Proper 18

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.

Paul turns the eyes of the early Christians from the realm of Rome to the realm of God. He turns our eyes from the realm of America to the realm of God. They are to see that the present authorities are masks of God, offices that God has established in his rule to the world. We are to see our president authorities...yes even President Trump and Governor Evers as masks of God. Though Nero's propaganda encouraged people to think he had sheathed his sword, Paul claims that God has given one to him and that he does not bear it in vain. Whether he believes or does not believe, he is a "servant of God," placed in authority.

Some who hold these offices test God's people. We definitely see that today Some people who hold these offices tests God's people, driving them deeper and deeper into the experience of faith, so that Christian believe in the midst of persecution and confess the faith in the midst of a world of contempt. Even in our country where things aren't looking good for the freedoms that we know and love, freedoms that become our idols and false gods. Freedoms that aren't true freedom, which is found in Christ alone. Others in office offer a public witness, honoring God by their words and seeking to serve him as best they can through their actions. Our relationship to these authorities, however, is not based on their person but on God's work. Within their offices, we see the power of God, establishing order for all people in the world. They have been given the power to restrain evil and promote good. Sometimes they use it wisely. Other times not. But that does not diminish their office, the fact that God has established the civil authorities not to save people but to care for them.

Yes, our civic leaders are not to save us, but to care for us. They are not your savior. Donald Trump, Tony Evers, Joe Biden, Scott Walker...any other leader, former leader, or desired leader is not your Savior. They are masks of God.

Paul's words encourage Christians to see how God can work through civil authorities, rewarding good, restraining evil, forming a society of peace where his people can gather and the word can be proclaimed. Honor is not given blindly. Respect is not paid indiscriminately. Christians follow rulers not on the basis of political propaganda or dreams of establishing an earthly kingdom of God.

No, we recognize that God has established his kingdom in Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, God has called you into that kingdom and, through this world and Satan himself should fight against it, that kingdom will never be taken away. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, this Jesus is with you. Like that early Christian fresco of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Through him, you live. In him, you die. And, by him, you will be raised to eternal life.

As you walk through the streets of this world, however, we are also aware of another working of God. God has established offices and uses them to create civil order and foster the public good. Power is recognized. Obedience is given. Not blindly. Not stupidly. But faithfully, as we seek to do good, to avoid evil and to honor these rulers as "ministers of God."

The God who rules his church in mercy also rules over all. Therefore, as Christians, we trust in God's mercy for our salvation and we live in faithful obedience to civil authorities, knowing that they have been instituted by God.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.