

At first the Fourth Commandment sounds like mere child's play. It's easy to think that once we've grown up, or attended our parents' funeral, that this Commandment is no longer necessary. We might be quick to assume that "Honor your father and your mother" is something you grow out of or that has an expiration date. But let me ask you, can you think of any other single Commandment that doesn't apply to every person on the planet? Luther sure seems to think that none of us can escape its demands—regardless of age, and no matter what our family dynamic. Just listen again—Luther says, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents *or other authorities*, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them." See, this doesn't apply only to our parents, but—as Luther says—every authority over us. And we aren't commanded just to honor them, not even just to serve and obey them, but even to *love and cherish* them.

But, y'know, this Commandment's broad definition shouldn't surprise us. The Bible often uses words like "father" or "mother" when it comes to other authority figures. For example, seven times in his first epistle, the Apostle John calls his readers "little children," as if he is their spiritual father. St. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, even calls the Church our "mother." Abraham is said to be the "father of many nations," even *our* father so-to-speak—ever heard the song, "Father Abraham has many sons, many sons has father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you . . ." Then, in her prophecy, Deborah, the female judge and military leader, calls herself "the mother of Israel." And just look at history—kings have been called "Sire," meaning father; and growing up in Virginia, I learned that the state's nicknamed "The Mother of Presidents" since eight of them, more than any other state, were born there. The point is, it's not hard to find in both the Church and in the world that—although not blood relatives—authority figures of all kinds are often called "father" or "mother." When we hear "Honor your father and your mother," God's talking about more than just our folks.

You probably heard the recent controversy. Just a couple months ago, back in June, the New York's Public Theater put on a production of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar." Only, that wasn't the problem. See, the rub came when the title character, who was played by a Donald Trump lookalike—hair and suit and facial expression, all—received a mock-assassination on stage. Now, it's not hard to see that somebody there was trying to make a bold political statement. And don't get me wrong—I'm not trying to make a political statement myself. But love the guy or hate him, if we're playing by God's rules, should that have happened? If it were a Barack Obama lookalike instead, that question would still stand. Here's the takeaway—it's not about the man, but the office. It doesn't matter who's occupying that office, it's about *Whose* office it really is.

St. Paul settles the matter for us this way. In today's Epistle, he says, "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, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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 God's 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 [. . .] For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

Y'know, maybe that's easy for Paul to say. I mean, he doesn't deal with the same kinda stuff we put up with. Perhaps his government wasn't so bad or his taxes weren't so high. If we think this, we'd be right; Paul's situation was actually very different . . . it was way *worse*. Ever heard of Emperor Nero? He was some guy, alright—he blamed the Church for the Great Fire of Rome, which began the first widespread persecution of Christians in Rome. And Nero's empire was really something too; y'know why?—because he made the Roman citizens foot the bill. But wait, it gets better—it would be at the hands of this very Roman Emperor that Paul would meet his end. As much as we wanna complain, it's tough to compete with Paul.

Yet, Paul still stands by his words—after all, it's God's Word. It's like he said, "there is no authority except from *God*, and those that exist have been instituted *by God*." Which kinda reminds me of what Jesus once said to Pontius Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." All authority—our parents, yes, but also our teachers, our police, our government, our bosses, *all authority*—comes from God. But what if they're a Nero? What if they're evil, awful people? What then?

Let me put it to you this way—in this morning's Bible Study we talked about the Donatistic Controversy. "Dona-wha—?" you ask? Well, during the reign of Emperor Diocletian, there was a largescale Christian persecution. Because people feared for their lives, many got nervous and said, "Jesus? Jesus, who? I don't know what you're talking about!" And this didn't just apply to regular laypersons, no, even some of the clergy quickly threw in their stole and joined the fraidy-cats. Then, after the dust settled and the coast was clear, people wanted back in, including some of the pastors. Anyway, the question was, if these ministers of God didn't have the faith to begin with to endure persecution, if they were oh-so-willing to give it all up, if they didn't serve the Church in all sincerity, then what did that mean for the Baptisms they did, the Communion they celebrated, the blessings they gave? Were those no good either? But again, it doesn't matter who's in that office, what matters is *Whose* office it is. You might have a total loser filling Office of the Keys, but it's still God's office, and that means God will always, always, *always* deliver the goods.

That's true, not only of the Church, but of the world. God's put His authority in the hands of sinful men, because it's through them that justice is still served, nations are protected, roads are built, economies are stabilized, and societies can live in relative peace and good order. I know it sounds weird, it sounds crazy, especially when looking back on just whose hands that authority's been placed. But God's not necessarily the One that decides *who's* in charge, it's just that whoever is needs to step into their office with great fear and trepidation knowing just Whose shoes they are filling. It's not on God if goofy people step in and do goofy things, but it's on those goofballs because they're goofing up God's office, as Judge and Ruler of all peoples. The only out we're given when it comes to the authorities, is to do like the apostles this morning. When told not to preach the Gospel, they said, "We must obey God rather than men." Ultimately, by submitting ourselves to the authorities, we are submitting to God. But when those authorities ask us to rebel against God, then we must necessarily rebel against them peacefully—and in doing so, we still submit to God.

My guess is, this Fourth Commandment, this morning's message, is enough to make any good red-blooded American cringe. But then again, we've never been very good with authority. Please understand me—I'm as much a patriot as anyone; I love my country; I am grateful for everything it stands for and all the liberties that I enjoy. But, honestly, submission just isn't in our DNA. I mean, the American Revolution, how does that fit in with the Fourth Commandment? Much of that was about having to follow inconvenient and annoying British laws, and over taxation without representation, but how does that hold up against what we heard today?

But come to think of it, our spirit of rebellion goes even deeper than just our nation's DNA, but it's embedded in our own. Ever since the Garden, we've been looking for ways to get out from under someone else's authority. Even before the world had ever known another king, there was just the King of kings and Lord of lords—God Himself. And interestingly enough, He was anything but oppressive, did anything but tax us. In fact, He made us everything we are and gave us everything we have—yet we still couldn't handle it. The serpent's words were just too tempting, "when you eat of [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will *be like God*, knowing good and evil."

That was the first democracy, when we kicked God off the throne and took it for ourselves. Reaching for that fruit, we said, "Death to tyrants!" But, I have to ask, have we really deposed any tyrants? Now we are the tyrants—the worst tyrants ever known. What's that cliché—"I am my own worst enemy"? Ruling ourselves, you and I have fallen victim to our own appetites. American consumerism—we call it "freedom" but the things we own end up owning us. American individualism—we call it "independence" but for many of us it feels more like loneliness. American freedom of expression—we call it "liberty" but who will break us of our ugly narcissism?

Here's who—Jesus. It's amazing to think that, when our God came back down to His Earth, He didn't come declaring war with us. He didn't rise up from the ranks, seize power, and lord it over us. He didn't throw us in prison; He didn't deport us; He didn't even hand us over to the firing squad. No, to our surprise—this world's Commander-In-Chief came

peacefully in the flesh of a tiny, defenseless newborn baby. To our astonishment—this world’s Chief Executive came riding into Jerusalem unassumingly, humbly, meekly on a donkey. To our utter awe and amazement—this world’s Guardian of the Economy came not to get anything but to give everything; He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. And nothing could prepare us for what came next—this world’s Legislative Leader became subject to the Law. Submitting to the authorities—He cooperated with the police, didn’t fight the charges brought against Him but accepted the verdict, He even acquiesced to His death sentence—Jesus has followed every rule and every reg.

But get ready for the shock of your life—it was all for *you*. Yes, not only has He borne your sins—your rebelliousness, your insubordination—but He has given you His perfect record. He didn’t just die for you, but He lived for you—in your place—so that His sinlessness and His obedience are yours. In God’s book, as He kept track of everything Jesus ever did—you’ll actually find that Jesus’ name is scratched out. Next to each item, you know who’s name’s been penciled in instead? Take a wild guess! You are credited with it all—it is yours.

The Akron Beacon Journal magazine—perhaps Eileen Buehl knows about it, she’s from Akron—once reported the story of a local radio sportscaster—let’s call him Larry. One day, Larry was covering an Indiana high school football game from the stands when all of a sudden it started raining. Well, in order to describe the action on the field Larry relied on a chart with the players’ names, numbers, and positions. But because of the rain, the ink on that chart started to run, and as the players got themselves muddy, it was tough to read the numbers on their backs. As you can imagine, this made identifying the players anything but easy—the only name that stood out to Larry on the lineup of the visiting team from Chicago was that of Blansky, a linebacker who was up for all-state.

Larry didn’t sweat this though, he had a strategy. Because local listeners weren’t familiar with the Chicago players, and since his station’s signal wasn’t strong enough to reach Chicago, Larry started making up the names of every Chicago player except Blansky. And since Blansky was the only legitimate name, Larry did his play-by-play with Blansky making most of the tackles. As the story goes, after the game the next day, the Chicago coach called up Larry to congratulate him on doing a great job covering the game—except for *one thing*. Apparently, Blansky had suffered a broken leg in the first half, and so the whole second half of the game he was laid up in the hospital. Just imagine Blansky’s surprise when he listened to himself play one heck of a game.

Well, maybe we should start calling *you* Blansky, because thanks to Jesus, so have you.