

Walking with Jesus Through Sinai:
 Seeking Moral Clarity in an Age of Chaos with the 10 Commandments
 CPC Adult Sunday Studies Spring 2025
 17 - Fifth Commandment, part 3

First Principles on Honoring Civil Authorities

Review - Last week we continued our study of the 5th commandment, looking at how God has given us certain roles and responsibilities in different institutions, which require corresponding care and honor. Whether you are a “superior, inferior, or equal,” you are called to act on behalf of God. This week, we’re narrowing in on God’s institution of the state and what that requires of all of us.

Exodus 20:12 - “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

Taking this commandment to apply to all authorities that God has placed in our life—or as the catechism puts it, honor “all superiors in age and gifts... according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places”—we need to be clear about the nature of the state institution. For what purpose did God give it? What is it meant to accomplish (and not)? [On the nature of the institution of the church, see our “What We Believe” class #18-20]

This week we’ll focus on the the **institution** of the state; next week, we’ll focus on how **individuals** are to engage in the state, among other institutions (church & family).

The Purpose of the Civil State

Read Romans 13:1-7

1. **Context** - don’t forget what surrounds this passage! Ch. 12 has “*Bless those who persecute you...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” And then 13.8 is “*Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*”
2. **Let’s get the principles before we jump too quickly to the exceptions!**
 1. Set up by God
 2. For a specific purpose - as a servant for your good, and as an avenger of evil, on God’s behalf

3. Requires an attitude of humility - "be subject", [don't] "resist", "be afraid" if you do wrong, give what the authorities are due, such as taxes, respect, etc.
4. The character of the person in authority seems irrelevant in this passage, especially noting that this is written to the church in Rome, where the non-Christian (and often very immoral) emperor resided.
5. WCF 23.1 says "God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under him, over the people, for his own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers." (See also 1Peter 2.13-17)

The State's Foundation in Common Grace (as opposed to Special Grace)

Gen. 4.15-17 - "Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden."

One can see the institutional separation of church and state in Genesis, where there is a difference between the chosen seed and the cursed one, yet even the cursed one has protection afforded him by God.

- "Common grace was introduced to act as a **rein to hold in check** the curse on mankind and to make possible an interim historical environment as the theater for a program of redemption." - Meredith Kline
 - In other words, the state exists to provide societal benefit for all people - whether they're of the family of God or not - *so that* the church can have the freedom to enact the kingdom of God.
- **Israel existed as a combined church-state entity**, where the kingdom of God was spiritual, physical, and included geographical spaces and political laws. This is why Israel could advance the kingdom of God through holy war.
- **The church, as the epicenter of the kingdom of God between Christ's first and 2nd comings**, is a spiritual kingdom with different purposes, scope, and weapons from Israel. See especially Eph. 2, Eph. 6.10-20, John 18.36 ("My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world"), Matt. 22.21 ("render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and

to God the things that are God's.”), and all the passages in which we are called to fight spiritually, to love our enemies, to rejoice in our sufferings, etc.

- Note: “spiritual” does not mean “invisible”. There is an “invisible church” and a “visible church”, and the local visible church is still called to engage with real flesh and blood people with physical needs. When the church provides physical needs, we’re pointing to the truth that the kingdom will be full of earthly justice.
- **Church as Foretaste of the Kingdom** - The Church is "The presence of the reign of God in foretaste. . . the sign of the inbreaking of the kingdom. The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission." The church "must itself be a new social order . . . as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society." - Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*
- **The New Heavens and the New Earth will return to the church-state framework** in the sense that the kingdom of God (Eden) will become earthly again, and it will cover the whole earth, which was the original purpose at creation. We taste that now in preemptive ‘installments’ as we pray for God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

On the Difference between the Church and the State

Note: of course, no table could adequately account for such a complex topic, but this provides helpful guidelines.

	Church	State
Relates to God as....	Savior	Creator
Relation to humanity	As (redeemed) sinner	As humanity
Members	Body of Christ	All
Rule/Constitution	Word of God	Reason/ “Light of nature”
Power	Ministerial/Declarative	Legislative/Judicial
Sanctions	Moral	Force, sword
Scope	Spiritual	Temporal
Purpose	Salvation, Supernatural	Natural good & evil

WCF 23.2 begins, "Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith."

Both institutions are created by God, yet with distinct God-given purposes. Notice that thinking "**institutionally**" is much different than thinking "**individually**." Obviously, individuals exist in both institutions (plus family), and much wisdom is needed when there is conflict, but this clarifies the purpose of each role according to the institution.

- **Just War - WCF 23.2** - "It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth; so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the new testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion."
- For example, I could serve in the military as a Christian, and therefore enforce God's "power of the sword", while also desiring as a member of the Church that my enemies be converted by the Word and the Spirit.

On Clarifying the Institutional Difference

"History establishes no truth more clearly than this, that when the Church has engaged in any manner in political difficulties, its best interests, its influence for good, and its religious character have suffered. Individual members of the Church have their responsibilities as citizens and as politicians and their duties are of a totally different sort from those of the **Church collectively**. Their religion should, indeed make them better citizens; but their citizenship in this world is one thing, and the citizenship of the great Church is another thing. The Church, as such, has absolutely no concern with those works in which it is the highest worldly duty of the man to engage. **The Church owes no allegiance to any earthly power**; it owes no fealty to any monarch or government. For there is no divided loyalty in the church, and no part of the Church, in Jerusalem or Antioch, in England or America, on earth or in heaven, that owes any allegiance which all the other parts do not equally owe. The mistake of confounding the duty of the individual citizen and church-member, with the duties of the church, has led to the most fatal errors." - Stuart Robinson (1862)