THE RESTRAINT OF EVIL
Sermon series: “The Law and the Gospel”
Romans 13: 1-7  January 20, 2019 –Ordination and Installation Service
The Church of the Covenant

The lawlessness, the discord, and the divisions in the United States today are because we do not understand John Calvin’s second use of the law, underpinning the CIVIL LAW, and its purpose --The Restraint of Evil. This series is a series on the three uses of the Old Testament Law once Christ has come and it uses our theological forebear, John Calvin, and his writings in The Institutes of Christian Religion as its basis. Last week, we expounded the first use of the law: the conviction of sin that brings a non-believer into a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Today, we expound the second use of the law, the basis for civil law that restrains evil.

Calvin bases his argument on the Apostle Paul’s discussion of the law in the 13th chapter of Romans, a portion of which I just read to you. The civil authorities are raised up over us by God; they are ordained of God. They are there to restrain evil in society. The Christian is to be obedient to the law because it is ordained of God and is there for our good. “Therefore he who resists authorities resists who God has appointed.” (Romans 13: 2) This was written in the context of the Roman persecution of the Christian Church. In 2019 for us it is almost impossible to consider that the laws of the land are to be based upon God’s laws, the Old Testament. It was not always so. If you look at the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. carved into the pediment at the very center of the frieze is a statue of Moses the lawgiver, Old Testament patriarch, lifting up the two tablets of the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament Law. The Old Testament Law and the Ten Commandments were the basis for the US Constitution, and the US Constitution is the basis for all of the rest of the laws of the nation. The laws are to be obeyed because they are based on God’s law. For us in cynical, skeptical 2019 we would scoff at such a notion. “Laws are just the manipulations of men and of power”, we might say. “I have the right to obey those laws I agree with and to disobey those laws with which I disagree. I get to consider whether they are right or wrong, just or unjust, and whether they apply to me or not.” Here is the root of American disorder and chaos in society today. Evil people, unregenerate and not God-followers, unrestrained by the law, resulting in unrestrained evil. The Bible calls this “the spirit at work in the sons of disobedience.” (Ephesians 2: 2) As Christians, the Apostle Paul and John Calvin are saying, we are to follow the law whether we like it or not. It is to be obeyed because it is based upon God’s law and the civil authorities have been appointed not ultimately by men, but by God.

To this general rule, there is an exception. From Old Testament times God would raise up Judges, spiritually gifted and empowered leaders, to lead the nation; some prophets, who would rail against injustice in the nation of Israel. In more modern times there are the Founders of our nation who fought a rebellion against authority, who based their premise on inalienable rights. Or the person of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor who opposed Adolph Hitler and the National Socialist Nazi’s in Germany. Or Dr. Martin Luther King, the Baptist Pastor who used non-violence to move the nation to greater civil rights in the 1960’s. I believe these are all uniquely inspired and qualified people, raised up by God, to affect particular purposes at
particular moments in time. We celebrate Martin Luther King tomorrow, and a nation that was able to change because of him, as someone uniquely raised up by the Lord God Almighty and given a particular assignment. But as for the rest of us we’re not that. We’re not the Old Testament Judge Deborah; we’re not Jeremiah the prophet; we’re not John nor Abigail Adams; we’re not Dietrich Bonheoffer in Nazi Germany in WWII, we’re not Martin Luther King. I’m just one member of a much larger society, subject to the laws and authorities, seeking to be obedient to God and to His will. The problem becomes when EVERYONE thinks they’re Dietrich Bonheoffer and EVERYONE thinks they have the right to pick and choose what laws they do and do not obey. The problem becomes when EVERYONE thinks they are a law unto themselves. That’s chaos; that’s lawlessness; that’s the spirit at work in the sons of disobedience run amuck.

I have used before the illustration of a Christian and a stoplight. Say, its 2am and you are driving toward an intersection that you often use. It tends to annoy you because the light is set wrong. The one side doesn’t have enough time to get through the light and the side you approach has to wait for what seems an unreasonable eternity. The light at Route 19 and the Strabane Square shopping center comes to mind. You know, when you’re coming down the hill from Giant Eagle, there is barely enough time for THREE cars to get through the intersection before the light changes and you have to stop. Manifestly UNJUST and ridiculous!!!! So its 2am and you’re coming down the side where you have to wait forever and the light turns red. There are no cars coming. So first, do you gun it and go through the intersection while the light is red because there is no one there and its 2am? Not if you’re a Christian. And then you stop at the light and you want to make a right turn on red, but the sign says “No right turn on red”. No one is there. No police car. What would it hurt? You hate that light anyway. Its stupid the way they have the light timed. Do you make the right? Not if you’re a Christian. We obey because it is the law. We obey, not because we are wiser or smarter than the law, we obey because the law is based on God’s law. And when we choose to stop at the stop light and not disobey the traffic laws, WHO we are obeying is not man, it is GOD.

We ordain and install new leaders in our church today. They have been called by God to serve. The Nominating Committee after much thought and prayer and study, believe these people are chosen by God to be our leaders. You as the congregation spiritually discerned they are indeed our leaders and elected them. They are to have the laying on of hands today; they will be empowered by God to do the service to which they have been duly elected. They should be treated with respect and honor. They should be lifted up in prayer. They should be followed because of WHO they seek to follow in their lives. As a congregation, we may not always agree with them, but it is our duty to seek to follow them and to be obedient to God in the process.

The second use of the law is as it serves as the underpinning of civil law…and as it invites Stu to sit at a stoplight, and to be obedient to those whom God has raised up over me, seeking to be obedient to both man and God in the process. I want to be obedient to God, in my heart and in my life and in my actions. Amen and Amen.

By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!