

## **A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 1, 2009**

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Today's lessons are about authority. The epistle (Rom 13:1ff) says, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers" (or authorities). In the gospel (Matt. 8:1ff.), the centurion says, "I am a man under authority." The same Greek word, *exousia*, is used in both passages.

The centurion understood that Jesus possessed authority based on his experience in the military. His superior had the right to tell him what to do. The centurion also had people under his authority. He had the right to tell them what to do. The centurion perceived that Jesus had this kind of authority over the spiritual world and disease. He could speak the word and it would be done.

It is precisely by demonstration of his authority that Jesus reveals himself to us in the gospels. Jesus "taught as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29). Jesus exercised authority over the wind and waves, over demons and unclean spirits. He claimed authority to forgive sins. He exercised authority over death by raising the dead to life.

The Bible tells us that Jesus has been given the authority to judge the world. John 5:22 says, "the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son." The risen Christ claimed universal authority saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth" (Matthew 28)

If Jesus has all authority, then any authority in the world operates by his will or permission. The fact that we are ruled by governments who impose moral order on society reflects the nature of God. In fact, the epistle calls the government "a minister of God to thee for good." That is, as the government enforces God's moral order on the society, it ministers on God's behalf.

In an ideal world, all earthly rulers would exercise their authority according to God's principles of justice, expressed in his moral law. In reality, of course, earthly rulers are often unjust. They favor some people over others. They do things that aren't right in order to maintain power. They tolerate injustice. This reflects the fact that we live in a fallen world.

However, even in a fallen world, governments impose some form of moral order. Those who do wrong tend to get in trouble for it. The point of the epistle, in telling us to obey, is that Christians should not be troublemakers. We should be good citizens who obey the moral law of God as reflected in the laws of the state. This is part of our duty to God.

We must begin to obey God because disobedience is the problem. Satan fell because he was unwilling to be under the authority of God. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they were saying to God, "We have heard your law and we will not keep it." Whenever we sin we defy the creator of the universe.

Redemption occurs when we repent and begin to obey. Human obedience begins with Jesus. Paradoxically, Jesus who has authority over everything in heaven and earth is also the one who became perfectly obedient. Philippians says that Christ "was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every other name" (2:10).

This is the pattern for us. Human disobedience led to the “fall” of man. Human obedience, after the pattern of Jesus, leads to our exaltation “in Christ.” As Ephesians says, God “made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:5-6 RVKJ).

We obey through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our natural tendency is to do what we want, which leads us to disobey God. The Holy Spirit makes us aware of our disobedience and leads us to confession and to new and faithful behavior. Through the Holy Spirit we are being changed. We are dying to sin and self-centeredness and we are rising with Christ to new life.

Now, if we are going to obey God, we must believe that Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth. The leper and the centurion in the gospel came to Jesus because they believed Jesus had the power to heal. We can only put our faith in Jesus and do what he asks of us if we believe he has the power to do what we trust him to do.

Faith depends upon the authority and power of Jesus. We can’t put our faith in someone who is merely a wise teacher or even in someone who merely shows great strength of character. For such a one cannot speak but the word and heal. We can only put our faith in the One; we can only trust the One who really has the power to do what we trust him to do.

If we are going to obey the commandments when it would be easier to disobey; if we are going to obey the laws of the land when we would rather not; if we are going to love our enemies as well as our friends; if we are going to forego satisfaction in the present for future promises, we must really believe that Jesus is the ultimate authority, that he has the power to raise us from the dead and bring us into his kingdom.

We must believe that Jesus can speak but the word and *our* souls and bodies will be healed. As Jesus said in John’s gospel,

The hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear [the voice of the Son of God], And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life” (5:25).

Our faith and obedience are rooted in our belief that Jesus has the authority and power to restore us to the fullness of life in a body, as Philippians says, “according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (3:21).

We come to Jesus at the altar of God because we believe that the same power by which Jesus will raise us from the dead at the last day is at work in us right now; because we believe, as Ephesians says, that God “is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (3:20).

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