

In the Creed we always say that Jesus suffered and was crucified under Pontius Pilate. It is very significant that this Roman governor's name is spoken by the faithful every single Sunday. It's significant for two reasons. First, it shows that our confession of faith is a historic confession. Pontius Pilate was a historic figure. The Roman authority, which he represented in Judea, is undeniably a historic empire. It isn't just a personally held belief. Jesus isn't a mere feeling, a narrative, or a principle we follow in life. He certainly is not a myth. No, Jesus is a real, historic figure who lived, died, and rose in real time. When Quirinius was governing Syria, when Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome, Christ the Lord was born in Bethlehem. In fact, his birth, life, death, and resurrection are the very fulfillment of all world history. St. Paul says that God sent his Son in the fullness of time to be born of a woman, born under the law in order to save us who were under the law (Gal 4:4). And this brings us to the other significant reason we mention Pontius Pilate in our Creed. Our Lord's suffering and death happened legally. God used the government to fulfill justice and righteousness for all people of all time.

Pontius Pilate was a man under authority. He was accountable to Caesar Tiberius, the Roman Emperor at the time. And all earthly authority comes from God himself. Just as Jesus himself spoke to Pilate, "You would have no authority over me had it not been given to you from above. (John 19:11)" The earthly ruler, Paul says, "is God's servant, an avenger, who must punish anyone doing wrong." When Jesus died, he wasn't taken out and stoned by a lawless mob. He wasn't assassinated. The Jews admitted that it was not lawful for them to put anyone to death. They didn't have the authority to kill him. And that is why Jesus hid himself every time anyone tried to kill him unlawfully. When the people in his own home town tried to throw him off a cliff, he passed through the midst of them and left. When the Jews picked up stones in the temple to throw at him, Jesus did the same thing. He left the temple. His time had not yet come. Jesus had to die a legal death. He was not to be crucified apart from the authority ordained by God.

God raises up earthly governments to carry out justice and righteousness. Of course, such righteousness is tainted with sin. It can't possibly save you, no matter how good of a citizen you are. There is no way for us to bring about God's righteousness by our own political means. No matter how many bad rulers we get rid of, no matter how many regimes we switch around, no matter how many good and just laws we pass, it will remain an earthly, civil righteousness, which cannot amount to anything before God.

There are those who think that Christ's kingdom is dependent in some way on the existence of the modern nation state of Israel. They say that we must support this state in the Middle East, not just because it is politically favorable to us, but because it is our Christian duty to bless God's chosen people. But this is simply wrong. God's chosen people have always been those who trust in the same promise in which Abraham trusted. The true Israel, which first existed among the Hebrews, was never bound to the Hebrew people exclusively. It always included those who relied on the promise of God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel are those who trust in the name of Jesus, whom Jeremiah calls THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jer 23). What our particular foreign policy is in the Middle East is a topic that honest people can discuss on their own. But to attach this to God's heavenly kingdom and his promise of salvation in Christ is wrong and wicked. It is to replace the grace of God with the plots of men.

The same goes for any other political state. Whether the United States is a Democracy, a Republic, a surveillance state, none of the above, or all of the above does not make one difference about your faith in Jesus Christ. Your faith depends on his righteousness, which far excels any righteousness accomplished through political means. God's authority does not depend on earthly governments.

Instead, earthly governments depend on God's authority. Those who ignore God's authority will ultimately fail, if not in this life, then certainly in the life to come. Their governments will come and go. They will shift. They will get more corrupt, less corrupt, and then even more corrupt. And what corrupts it is not merely the bad guys, whoever they are. What corrupted the Roman Republic was not the Plebeians or the Patricians. What corrupted the Hebrew people was not whether they aligned themselves with Herod, the Pharisees, or the Sadducees. What corrupts American government is not the Democrats or the Republicans themselves. What corrupts every government of all time is sin. It is the sin you and I were born with, the sin that still clings to our nature.

Sin is what causes law makers to sanction the murder of the unborn, the disregard for marriage, and the corruption of a child's education. Sin is what drives people to disregard the poor in their own neighborhoods while they improve their Public Relations image by giving to this or that charity. Sin is what causes people to divorce their spouse without cause while getting lawyers and law makers to make it easier for them to do so. It's sin, the same original sin that causes a father to neglect the care and discipline of his own children.

All earthly authority is derived originally from the authority of parents. God does not first say, "Honor the highest earthly authority, or whoever has the most earthly power." No, he says, "Honor your father and your mother." From this commandment we get the honor of all other earthly authority. When you honor your teacher at school, the police officer who pulls you over, your congressman whom you are contacting, or the clerk at the county courthouse – when you give these people the honor that is due them, regardless of how good or bad they are – it all reflects how you honor your mom and your dad. So any attempt to bring about a just state while ignoring or undermining the authority and responsibility of parents toward their children is obviously wrong. Any unbeliever can recognize that a good government wants citizens who are loyal to their parents.

Yet even the authority of parents is tainted with sin. Having a good political opinion, which gives honor to the authority of the home, is not what will save you from God's judgment. We should obviously oppose any attempt to dishonor marriage and the family as an attack on the foundations of civil life. But we still need to recognize that even these basic pillars and foundations of the home are corrupted with sin, with our sin, the sin of the human heart. You are not righteous before God because of how loyal you are to your parents, your house, or your homeland. In other words, you are not righteous by how well you fulfill the law.

When people think they are righteous by how well they fulfill the law, then they always lower the bar for themselves. They replace the love for their everyday neighbor with an allegiance to some political cause. They begin to trust in their own moral or political opinions for their salvation. They act as if their Christian faith depends on having the right policies in place. Out of some blind political loyalty or because of sheer laziness, they just go along with whatever the godless culture thinks. They justify evil things, often because their preferred political party is promoting it or tolerating it. They make excuses for abortion, the neglect of their poor neighbors, or some kind of false doctrine, because they are more devoted to political causes than the cause of God's Word.

Our Lord Jesus fulfilled God's law, not by bringing about a better form of earthly government, but by obeying his Father all the way to his death on the cross. He loved God above all things and his neighbor as himself. He spoke the truth openly, right in front of the rulers. He obeyed the government perfectly, submitting even to crucifixion on a cross. Yet, he did so with a pure devotion only to the truth of God's

Word. In this way, God used his servants of justice to fulfill what their politicking and legislating could never accomplish. When Pontius Pilate, by the authority invested in him, handed Jesus over to be crucified, God was working through it to bring about the redemption of all sinners.

Jesus knew the limitations of civil laws. When he rebuked the rulers for their disrespect for marriage, he told them that Moses allowed them to get divorced because of the hardness of their hearts. This is the nature of laws. They always bend and compromise in order to keep the outward peace. After all, you can't send everyone to jail. You'd cause a riot. It's a reality in this life. And it is a testimony to the fact that the law cannot give us rest and peace.

The Pharisees, along with some of Herod's men, asked Jesus whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Herod's men were loyal to Caesar. The Pharisees were the party of the people. If Jesus says that you shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, then Herod will accuse him of rebelling against the emperor. But if he says that you should pay these taxes, then the Pharisees can accuse him of betraying his fellow Israelites who are under the occupation of Rome. Jesus doesn't fall for their tricks. He rightly points out that Caesar has things that belong to him. His image is on the coin. So give him what is his. But give to God what belongs to him.

After Jesus said this, they left him alone. He escaped their plot to have him arrested. And yet, only a few days after this, Jesus would be handed over to Caesar's government, condemned, and crucified. Our Lord was not trying to save his own skin when he told them to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Instead, he was teaching that all earthly authority is given by God. St. Peter tells us to give honor to all men (1 Pet 2). Honor all people according to the duties God has given each of them. And do your own duty as well. Carry out the authority God has given you, whether in the home, in the office, in the classroom, or wherever. But don't fear those who can only kill your body. Instead, fear God. Let him sort it all out. God will judge each person according to the authority he himself has distributed. If you serve in the government, then do your duty honestly. Recognize that you are under God's authority. Speak the truth. If your superior is doing what is evil, then God will judge him. If God puts you in a position to make just laws, then do so knowing that only God can work things out for good. This is what it means to fear God. And when you fear God, then there is nothing else for you to fear.

When you know the God from whom all authority comes, then you are free. When Jesus was shackled and condemned to the cross, he remained free. He remained the innocent Son of God. He rejoiced to endure all of this, because he knew that he was obeying his Father. He was giving to God what belonged to him. And he gave it all for your sake. He gladly bore God's own judgment against sinners, because he knew that he was delivering you from eternal judgment and into the favor of your heavenly Father. He fulfilled the law perfectly by loving perfectly. This is what we depend on. It is the righteousness we rest in. It is the very ground of our faith, which give us peace with God.

So don't be afraid of earthly authority, whether it is the little bit God gives you, or the great amount he seems to have given others. Don't worry about what people can do to your body. Instead, remember that your citizenship is in heaven where you wait for Christ to raise your body from the dead to be like his own glorified body. He will do this not by the power of laws and political force, but by his gospel, the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. Amen.