
Lesson 6

54. We come now to the main part of this treatise. After we have already learned that there must be worldly authority on earth, and how it is to be exercised in a Christian and constructive manner, we must now learn how far its arm extends and how widely its hand stretches, lest it extent too far and encroach upon God's kingdom and rule.

It is of critical importance for us to know this: For were it given too wide a scope, intolerable and terrible injury follows, while on the other hand, injury is also inevitable where it is restricted too narrowly. In one case worldly authority punishes too much, in the other it punishes too little. If authority were to err in any direction, however, it would be more sufferable to see it punish too little, for it is always better to let a scoundrel live than to put a righteous man to death. For the world has plenty of scoundrels anyway and must continue to have them; but godly men are scarce.

Two Kinds of Law for two kinds of people

55. Most important to remember is the following: The two groups of Adam's children – the one in God's kingdom under Christ and the other in the Kingdom of the World under governing authority, as was said above – have also two kinds of law. For every kingdom must have its own laws and statutes: Without law no kingdom and no government can survive, as everyday experience amply shows. The worldly government has laws which extend no farther than to life and property and outward affairs on earth. For over the soul God can and will let no one rule but himself. Therefore, where the worldly authority arrogates to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and corrupts them. We want to make this crystal clear so that everyone will grasp it, and that our fine no-

blemen, the princes and bishops, will see what fools they are when they seek coercing people with their laws and commandments into believing this or that.

56. Should a man-made law be imposed upon the soul to make it believe this or that, as its human author may prescribe, there is certainly no word of God for it. And if there is no word of God for it, then we cannot be sure whether God will have it so done. For we cannot be certain that what He does not decree pleases Him. On the contrary: we can be quite certain that it is not pleasing to him. For He desires that our faith be grounded simply and purely on His divine word alone. He says in Matthew 16:18, "ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH."; and in John 10:4-5, " WHEN HE HAS BROUGHT OUT ALL HIS OWN, HE GOES ON AHEAD OF THEM, AND HIS SHEEP FOLLOW HIM BECAUSE THEY KNOW HIS VOICE. BUT THEY WILL NEVER FOLLOW A STRANGER; IN FACT, THEY WILL RUN AWAY FROM HIM BECAUSE THEY DO NOT RECOGNIZE A STRANGER'S VOICE." From this it follows that with such a wicked command the worldly power is pushing souls to eternal death. For it forces them to believe as right and certainly pleasing to God that which is in fact uncertain, most truly: certain to be displeasing to him as long as there is no clear word of God about it. Whoever believes something to be right which is wrong or uncertain is denying that truth, which is God himself. He believes in the lie and the error, and counts as right that which is incorrect.

57. Hence, it is the height of folly when they command that one shall believe the church, the fathers, the councils – even though there is no word of God for it. The devil's apostles command such things, but not the church. For the church commands nothing unless it knows for certain that it is God's word. As the Apostle Peter puts it, "IF ANYONE SPEAKS, HE SHOULD DO IT AS ONE SPEAKING THE VERY WORDS OF GOD"⁴⁶. Yet it will be a long time before they can ever prove that the decrees of councils are God's word. Still more foolish is it when they assert us that kings, princes, and the mass of mankind believe in such a way. By all means, we are not baptized into kings, or princes, or even into the mass of mankind, but into Christ and God himself. Neither are we ourselves called kings, princes, or common folk, but Christians. No one shall or can command the soul unless he understands how to show it the way to heaven. But this no man can do, only God alone. Therefore, in matters which concern the salvation of souls nothing but God's word shall be taught and nothing else accepted.

58. And further: Complete fools though they might be, they must admit that they have no power over souls. For no human being can kill a soul or give it life, or lead it to heaven or hell. If they will not take our word for it, Christ himself will attend to it strongly enough where He says in Matthew 10:28,

⁴⁶ See 1 Peter 4:11

"DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THOSE WHO KILL THE BODY BUT CANNOT KILL THE SOUL. RATHER, BE AFRAID OF THE ONE WHO CAN DESTROY BOTH SOUL AND BODY IN HELL". I think it is clear enough here that the soul is taken out of all human hands and is placed under the authority of God alone.

Spiritual belief cannot be imposed by worldly power

59. Now tell me: How much brains must there be in the head of a person who issues commands in an area where he has no authority whatsoever? Would you not judge insane the person commanding the moon to shine whenever he wanted it to? How well would it go if the Leipzigers⁴⁷ were to impose laws on us Wittenbergers⁴⁸, or if, conversely, we in Wittenberg were to legislate for the people of Leipzig! They would certainly send the law-makers a thank-you gift of hellebore⁴⁹ to cleanse their brains and cure their sniffles. Yet today our emperor and our clever princes are exercising this very behavior. They are allowing pope, bishop, and *sophists* to lead them on – as one blind man leading the other – to command their subjects to believe whatever they just please, and without God's word for it. And still they would like to be known as *Christian* princes! God forbid!

60. Besides, we can clearly see this from the following: Any authority shall and can act only in situations where it can see, recognize, judge, condemn, cause change, and succeed modifying. What would I think of a judge who should blindly decide cases which he neither hears nor sees? Tell me then: How can a mere man see, recognize, judge, condemn, and change hearts? That is reserved for God alone, as Psalm 7:9 says, "GOD, WHO SEARCHES MINDS AND HEARTS"; and in verse 8, "THE LORD JUDGES THE PEOPLES." And Acts 1:24⁵⁰ says, "GOD KNOWS EVERYONE'S HEART"; and Jeremiah 17:9 – 10, "THE HEART IS DECEITFUL ABOVE ALL THINGS AND BEYOND CURE. WHO CAN UNDERSTAND IT? I THE LORD SEARCH THE HEART AND EXAMINE THE MIND, TO REWARD A MAN ACCORDING TO HIS CONDUCT, ACCORDING TO WHAT HIS DEEDS DESERVE."⁵¹ A court should be and must be quite certain and clear if it is to render judgment, and must view everything in a clear light. But the thoughts and inclinations of the soul can be known to no one but God. Therefore, it is

⁴⁷ The citizens of the city Leipzig

⁴⁸ The citizens of the town of Wittenberg, the place Luther lived in at the time

⁴⁹ A somewhat poisonous plant historically used to cure a variety of ailments including, and that is likely the reference here, foolishness.

⁵⁰ See also Act 15:8

⁵¹ This is the text of Jeremiah 17:9-10 from the current NIV translation. Any translations you may encounter that refer here to God searching "the heart and reins" are translating a Lutheran metaphor for a thorough examination as if it were meant as verbatim text. This error is comparable to translating the phrase "it is raining cats and dogs" as saying there were literally animals falling from the skies.

futile and impossible to order or by force compel anyone to believe this or that. The matter must be approached in a different way. Force will not accomplish it.

And I am surprised at the big fools, for they themselves all say: "*De occultis non judicat ecclesia*", meaning "the church does not judge secret matters". Now, if the spiritual rule of the church then governs only public matters, how dare the mad worldly authorities judge and control such a secret, spiritual, and hidden matter as is faith?

What they believe is every man's responsibility

61. Furthermore, every man runs his own risk in believing as he does, and he must see to it himself that he believes rightly. As nobody else can go to heaven or hell in my stead, so nobody else can believe or disbelieve for me; as nobody else can open or close heaven or hell for me, so nobody else can drive me to belief or faithlessness. Since how he believes or disbelieves is a matter for the conscience of each individual, and since this takes nothing away from the worldly authority, the latter should be content to attend to its own affairs and let men believe this or that, all as they are able and willing, and push no one by force. For faith is a free act, to which no one can be forced. Indeed, it is a work of God in the spirit, not something which outward authority could hope to compel or create. Hence arises the common saying, found also in St. Augustine, "*No one can or ought to be forced to believe.*"

62. Moreover, the blind, wretched fellows do not see how utterly hopeless and impossible a thing they are attempting. For no matter how harshly they lay down the law, or how much they fret and fume, they can do no more than force an outward following of people's mouths and people's hands; the heart they cannot force, even though they may work themselves to a frazzle. For the proverb is true: "*Thoughts are free.*"

What are we looking at, then, would they persist in their desire to force people to believe from the heart, even as they see that it is impossible? In this way they only drive weak consciences to lie, to deny, and to utter what is not in their hearts. They thereby load themselves down with dreadful alien sins, for all the lies and false confessions which such weak consciences utter fall back upon him who compels them. Even if their subjects were in error, it would be much easier simply to let them err than to compel them to lie and to utter what is not in their hearts. For it is not right to try preventing evil by something even worse.

63. But would you like to know why God ordains that the worldly princes must offend so frightfully?⁵² I will tell you. God has given them to a depraved mind and will make an end of them just as He does of the spiritual nobility. For my ungracious lords, the pope and the bishops, are supposed to be bishops and preach God's word. This they leave undone, and have become worldly princes who govern with laws which concern only life and property. How conveniently they have turn things upside down: They are supposed to be ruling souls inwardly by God's word; instead they outwardly rule over castles, cities, lands, and people, torturing their souls with unspeakable outrages⁵³.

64. And so it is also with the worldly lords, who are supposed to govern lands and people outwardly. This they defer and leave undone. They can do no more than maltreat and fleece, heap tax upon tax and tribute upon tribute, cutting loose a bear over here and a wolf over there. Besides this, there is no justice, integrity, or truth to be found among them. What they do is beneath robbers and crooks, and their temporal rule has sunken to the same low level as that of the spiritual tyrants. For this reason God so perverts their minds that they continue in futility to try exercising a spiritual rule over souls, just as their counterparts try to establish worldly rule. They blithely heap alien sins upon themselves and incur the hatred of God and man, until they all go down altogether with bishops, monks and priests, one scoundrel with the other. Then they lay all the blame on the gospel, and instead of repenting their sin they blaspheme God and say that our preaching has brought about that which their perverse wickedness has earned them – and continues to earn them. This is precisely what the Romans did when they were destroyed. So, here then you have God's decree concerning the high and mighty. But they are not to believe it, however, so that this stern decree of God be hindered by their repentance.

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Review Questions

1. What happens if worldly authority extends too much?

2. What are governments and rulers making themselves into when they prescribe laws for the soul?

⁵² References include Romans 1:28; Jeremiah 30:11 and Amos 9:8

⁵³ Luther's wording here actually could be translated as "unspeakable murders".

3. In what areas do Worldly powers *not* have authority?

4. Who is responsible for what I believe or disbelieve?

5. Who are the *spiritual tyrants* Luther mentions in passage 64?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. Review Luther's irate passage on the doings of *his* government in passage 64. Where do you see the world's contemporary governments "*cutting loose a bear over here and a wolf over there*", that is: they artificially produce threats? According to Luther, what would be their punishment for such behavior?

2. Worldly authority should "*be content to attend to its own affairs and let man believe ... and constrain no one by force*" (See passage 61). What would perhaps change in a country if Christian belief were to be forced on each citizen per government orders, whether they agree or not?

