

Christ's Straight Scepter

**Excerpts from Luther's 1532
Lecture on Psalm 45**

Translated

by

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Introduction

In 1532, Luther lectured on several psalms at Wittenberg University, including Psalm 45.¹ Based on Hebrews 1:8, Luther—applying his key hermeneutical rule that “scripture interprets scripture”—interpreted Psalm 45 as prophesying the spiritual kingdom of the Messiah.

This is a wonderful interpretation that clearly sets forth Luther’s understanding of the spiritual kingdom of Christ centered in the gospel of free forgiveness and salvation on account of Christ’s merit alone. In this small volume, I have only translated a small part of it, Luther’s interpretation of verse 6, because it offers an important contrast between Christ’s kingdom and the kingdoms of the world specifically on the point of the role the law plays in them.² Look for future posts to explore this critical distinction in the context of Luther’s distinction between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world.

You can find a complete translation of this lecture into English in Luther’s Works, American Edition (AE) 12:197-300. While I have not checked the entire translation, the translation specifically of verse 6 is problematic, to say the least. This is so because it does not use Luther’s own translation of verse 6, which makes nonsensical the main point of his interpretation, namely, the contrast between Christ’s kingdom and the kingdoms of the world.

Specifically, the bible translation used by AE (12:236) is quite similar to the RSV’s translation, which in verse 6 reads: “Your divine throne endures for ever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of *equity*.”³ Luther, however, translated this verse as follows: “O God, your chair remains forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a *straight* scepter.”

The critical Hebrew noun here is *mišor*, translated as “equity” by the RSV and as “straight” by Luther. The “m” at the beginning of the word indicates this word is a nominalized form of the verbal root, *yšr*. As a result, the noun means something like “straightness, uprightness.” A standard dictionary even adds, “equity.”⁴

I am always skeptical when I see a term like “equity” in a Hebrew dictionary (or a translation of a Hebrew text). Not because I am against equity (I’m not), but because—in the Western philosophical tradition—“equity” is a pretty well-defined (some today would say: loaded, misleading, “woke,” etc.) term. Is that the intended meaning of Ps. 45:6? If not, what other meaning of “equity” may be in play here?

¹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p. 134.

² The translation of this verse is based on the German text found in the St. Louis Ed. (SLE) 5:381-399. I have consulted the Latin text found in Weimar Edition (WA) 40.2:515-532 for greater clarity in the English text.

³ See AE 12:v: “We have proceeded in a similar way in the matter of Bible versions, translating Luther’s translations. Where this could be done by using an existing English version—King James, Douay, or Revised Standard—we have done so. Where it could not, we have supplied our own.”

⁴ See *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 448-449.

For Luther, “equity”—substantially in the sense it was defined by Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)—is a highly important and positive concept that he found elsewhere in the bible⁵ and that specifically means the ability to moderate a general law in a difficult circumstance not foreseen in the law due to its generality and where applying the general law without moderation would result in injustice. In fact, Luther uses this exact definition of equity in his lecture on Psalm 45:6 below.

Given the context—a psalm praising the excellencies of the kingdom of Christ—Luther did not introduce the concept of equity to highlight human ingenuity, but to highlight a key *deficiency* of human laws enacted by earthly governments cannot avoid: These man-made laws must be written in such general terms that there will be situations when they simply do not “fit” without working great injustice. In this situation, equity should be applied by the judge to moderate the harshness of the law in that situation to arrive at a more just or equitable application.

Luther, e.g., called for equity to be applied to moderate the harshness of the law against rebellion to deal with the aftermath of the Peasants’ War in 1525/26. Concretely, Luther demanded that a case-by-case adjudication of the participants in this rebellion be undertaken to distinguish the leaders from those who were misled—instead of simply applying the law and killing everybody.⁶

I’ll have much more to say about this in future blogposts. For purposes of translating Ps. 45:6, however, given that Luther understood equity as a “fix” for imperfect *human* laws, it is no surprise that he talks about it in a context that, in Ps. 45:6, talks about Christ’s *straight* royal scepter, with the understanding that a royal scepter is a symbol of royal authority, including the authority to make and enforce laws.

Indeed, Christ’s law is “straight,” perfect (see Ps. 19:7). Human laws are therefore necessarily crooked, imperfect. They require equity, lest they kill the guilty and the innocent alike. What is more, human governments that enact human laws—including governments run by well-meaning Christians, including King David—are crooked, imperfect. Equity and patience are needed to keep government and people together and prevent a civil war.

Certainly, there’s much to explore here when it comes to distinguishing Christ’s kingdom and the kingdoms of the world in general and life in the U.S. today specifically.

But for purposes of this short introduction, it’s easy to see that Luther’s comments on equity—his distinction of Christ’s straight scepter and the scepters of the kings of the world—make no sense if you ascribe “equity” to Christ’s scepter, as done by the translator of Luther’s lecture on Ps. 45 in the American Edition.

Reading this translation, Luther would say: No, there is no equity in Christ’s scepter and kingdom at all. His law is perfect. And there is only perfect righteousness and holiness (Rev. 21:27). Equity is only necessary for our life in this world where we are imperfect and unholy.

⁵ See, e.g., Tit. 3:2 as explained by Luther in AE 29:74-76.

⁶ See Martin Luther, *Christians Can Be Soldiers* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2010), p. 30-33. This entire book is available to be downloaded for free at the publisher’s website [here](#). For the standard translation of this section in Luther’s seminal treatise *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*, see AE 46:100-103.

So much for this introduction. Keep reading to find out how there is perfect righteousness and holiness in Christ's kingdom to see why that is actually a good and wonderfully comforting reality, and why it is in perfect agreement with what Luther says elsewhere about the gospel.

Psalm 45:6

O God, your chair remains forever and ever.

This verse has been sufficiently addressed in chapter 1 of the Letter to the Hebrews, although only a part of it has been addressed and used there to prove the divinity of Christ. We, however, do not only learn from this verse that Christ is true God by nature. We are also reminded of his office, according to which he has to judge and preserve discipline and order in his kingdom. “Your chair,” he says—this means, your royal throne—“is eternal.” This is a free and complete confession of his government by which the prophet proclaims, before the revelation of the gospel, such a King who should not be succeeded by any other person. Rather, he would be an eternal King who would govern his kingdom into all eternity. .

Meanwhile, while we live here on earth, it is the office of Christ to inaugurate the kingdom of life and to destroy the kingdom of death and sin, until he will transfer those who are his from this misery into eternal life. As a result, we should not think about Christ as the Muslims and the Papists do. The former teach that Christ sits idly in a corner, thinking that Mohammed was his successor. The latter have the opinion—in no way better than that of the Muslims—that Christ sits idly somewhere waiting for the day of judgment, when he will thunder against the sinner. This is why they take refuge to the intercessions of the saints, call upon the holy virgin and other saints. This is what it means to render Christ useless. We should not do this but hold that he is at work. Concretely, we should believe that he governs, fights, has a chair and scepter; that he preserves and bestows righteousness; and that he does all this daily with great power in the Church.

Indeed, we see that Scripture is used and expounded and that the people also live accordingly to the extent they are able to do so on account of their inborn weakness. All the words about Christ which are heard in this context say that he himself does all this. Everyone who is protected against sin, against the enthusiast spirits and other evils is protected by Christ who does this in us and through us. For if he were not in us, we could not speak a single word about him, as Paul attests in 1 Cor. 12:3: “No one can call Jesus a Lord without the Holy Spirit.” This is why Christ is not idle, as he would be if we were to remain silent, as he is idle among the Papists and other sects and the Muslims. Among them, Christ does nothing, because they do not want to let him rule over them. But among us, Christ thinks, works, and lives everything that is ours.

Properly speaking, then, the kingdom of Christ is that he rules in this life now and will fully give righteousness and eternal life after this life. He does this in the following manner: After we have been baptized and illumined through the gospel and have begun to trust this King and to cling to him, there still remains sin in our flesh. Moreover, countless darts of the devil come at us—such as bad days, sects, weakness—because all Christians are negligent in works and words and do not fight with zeal. When this happens, Christ’s chair and office is seen most, as he then sweeps away the old leaven and increases his kingdom and overcomes the emerging evil.

And this is the divine righteousness, which increases more and more. As a result, when a Christian falls, he will be raised up. But, if he does not want to, he will be excluded, God’s wrath will be announced to him, and he will be excommunicated from the communion that is in Christ.

All this, however, has the purpose that faith may increase and that we may grow in the knowledge of Christ, so that our body may be killed and preserved in chastity, patience, and other Christian virtues, so that we may fight the leaven of sin.

Yet all these things are Christ's official acts. Thus, when I rebuke and reprove people—either publicly in a sermon or privately—it is Christ who reproves. This is what it means to combat sin that always grows back. It means to put off sin that always sticks to us and that always makes us slothful, as it says in Hebrews 12. For sin weighs us down and always keeps us busy, as we see that Christians frequently fall. I may fall by angry or proud thoughts. The devil may plague me by sadness and despair. Or the pope and the sects with their countless offenses may break in to fight against me. When this happens, I stand firm and resist; I rebuke and admonish. But who does all this? Of course, it is Christ who does it. He sits on his chair and judges the sin that grows back.

It is therefore the judgment of this King which Paul pronounces in Romans 6:12: “Do not let sin rule in your mortal body but rule over its desires.” For just as a city will never have the kind of obedient and good citizens that make courts and government officials superfluous, so remainders of anger, arrogance, unchastity, etc., are always hidden in the flesh among the Christians. These remainders try to raise their head and constantly attack us. In this situation, the Word is necessary. You should read, hear, meditate on this Word. You should go into your room, bend the knees, and pray. This is what it really means to suppress the sin that always grows back, which wages war against us and takes us captive.

This is why it is necessary for a Christ to fight against it in this way. Yet if we do not resist sin in this way but are idle and rebuke neither ourselves nor others, we are unable to know whether we truly believe. Yet this is the sign that Christ is among us to execute judgment and to be strong: The voice of punishment and rebuke is still heard, which is the voice of rebuke against the devil, the voice by which the sects are chastised and battered, the voice by which offenses are hindered and reprovved. These thunderbolts come from the throne of Christ and are sure signs that Christ is present and judges. Faith and the other fruits of faith, however, grow by this judgment, which Christ carries out in us.

Learn, therefore, to open your eyes and to know the Church and to believe that it is holy. For these days, all the wise people are offended by this imperfect appearance of the Church. For because reason hears that the Church is holy and without spots (Ephesians 5:27), it thinks that the Christians are without fault. And even the Christians themselves have a hard time overcoming the offenses in which they find themselves at time. Even they conclude based on their works: You are not perfectly pure and without sin; therefore, you are no Christian.

This is why we must determine with certainty what “holy” means. For the Church is not called holy because it has no sin. For Paul says in Romans 6:12: “Do not let sin rule,” namely, “to obey it.” He confesses that sin and evil lust are in the Christians. And he exhorts them not to let the sin rule. This is why the Church is holy and is called holy according to its firstfruits, not according to its tithe or fullness. It is holy through its faith in the name of Christ, in whom she has purity. It does not have this purity in itself, but it is holy on account of his name. For sins are hidden in the

saints—but these are sins that have been turned into servants, not sins that rule. Yet, at times, these sins break forth, as the saints are moved by impatience, sadness, despair, etc. These are the desires of sin, but not the rule of sin. For although they oppress me, I nonetheless lay hold of Christ and kick this impatience and sadness to the curb and restrain the remainders of sin.

The Church is therefore holy in Christ, its head, and it is pure in Christ's name. But it is not holy and pure in itself. Rather, it is in hidden and growling sins, just as wild beast—jailed and bound in chains—growl and desire to hurt people. For our sin has been bound and jailed in chains. It would like to be free from these chains, but it must be resisted. When the devil wants to throw you into sadness and take faith away, rise up in faith and say to him: “Be gone, Satan, and be silent. My Christ lives!” Likewise, when the sects cause unrest, say: “Be silent! Here is the Word of God which you will not overthrow etc.”

We must, therefore, know and *believe* that the Church is holy, but we are not to *see* it as holy, because the Creed says: “I believe a holy Church,” not: “I see a holy Church.” Now, if you want to judge by what you see, you will see that the Church is sinful; you will see that it has many and countless offenses in it; you will see fellow Christians who deal with powerful emotions, as one is moved by impatience, the other by anger, and the third in some other way. This is why it does not say: “I see a holy Church.” Rather, it says: “I believe,” because it does not have its own righteousness out of itself, but has an alien righteousness out of Christ who is her head. And in this faith, I perceive its holiness, which is a holiness that must be believed, as one cannot touch or see it.

I say this in so many words, however, to offer comfort against certain people who, when they see a molehill of a sin in our body, turn it into a mountain by saying something sarcastic like this: Look, these are the “fruits” of the gospel! Meanwhile, these people themselves are utterly leprous. They do not see, or care about, the dangerously festering sores and ulcers in themselves, while they criticize us for the tiniest of injuries. They say: Should one not rebuke these Christians, in whom we do not see any special holiness? They eat, drink, get dressed, and work like other people, etc. Indeed, your impure eyes should be able to see the true holiness of the Church! If you cannot see more than this, you should at least see that there is not the same kind of nastiness you can see among its opponents. Besides, they have the pure Word! They study it diligently, comfort each other with the Word concern Christ, and carry out their other Christian duties. You do not see these things.

In fact, these critics are not worthy of seeing these things, because the true fruits and the sure marks of the Church are hidden from them. They are able to condemn the small weaknesses but are unable to see the great miracles the Church performs. For is it not a great miracle that I can teach the Word, that someone else can hear it—all the while the devil does not want to put up with it and resists it? But they are unworthy to see any of this.

This is why you should know that the Church is holy, but in such a way that Christ judges, that he exercises his believers by removing and condemning sins. For there is sin in the flesh that seeks to rule the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). Timidity would like to rule and extinguish faith. Unchastity, too, would like to rule in the flesh of a young man when he sees a beautiful girl. But the

Christians do not obey these temptations! Although they are tempted by sin, they restrain their evil lust; they do not carry out fornication; they do not seek to commit adultery. They feel the vices, but do not allow evil lusts to rule.

Yet you want them to be utterly without sin. This is because you do not know that the holiness of the Church consists in what is written here: Christ is Judge and sits on his throne to sweep out sin, to resist lest offenses sneak in. He does this lest our conscience overwhelm us, lest our faith be endangered by despair but the fruits of the Spirit—patience, love, etc.—may increase.

Yet these fruits will never be perfect because we always feel flesh and blood in ourselves. This is why it is necessary that we are cleansed daily, that the firstfruits we received in baptism increase, and that we strive toward perfection in this way. Yet this is impossible unless we struggle against the devil, the law, and sin every day. To be sure, we would like to be pure, but because this is impossible in this flesh, Christ is present and extinguishes sin. Then the devil returns and attacks us again. Then Christ returns again to help us. As a result, where Christ is present, these types of vices are not carried out, although they are felt in the flesh. Adultery, theft, and discord are not tolerated among us but are rebuked more severely than anywhere else. This is how our King is with us who judges us in moderation, not in anger (Jer. 10:24)—by suppressing and extinguishing the sin that dwells in our flesh.

The scepter of your kingdom is a straight scepter.

So far, we have heard that the prophet distinguishes this kingdom of Christ from all the other kingdoms of the world in every which way. As a result, there is no kingdom on earth that is like Christ's kingdom. Yet if there is some similarity, it is no more than in mere words and in a faint shadow or outward appearance. As far as the substance is concerned, however, Christ's kingdom is completely unlike the kingdoms of the world. His kingdom is an eternal and spiritual kingdom, which is ruled by a single person who is God and man, mortal and immortal at the same time, who has transitioned from this life into a different life—who rules in favor of life against death, for righteousness against sin, for salvation against condemnation.

And just as what has been stated here about Christ's kingdom is such that it does not pertain to any other kingdom—except as a faint shadow—there is also no other king who lives forever. All other kings only live for a time and are succeeded by others. As a result, the following point—the rod or the straight scepter—also pertains only to Christ's kingdom. The rod signifies a scepter, the insignia of a king. For just as the crown signifies the power and rule of the kingdom, so the scepter signifies the laws and the wisdom which rules the kingdom. The scepter of Christ's kingdom, however, is extolled with a special praise: It is straight, not crooked or full of knots. This means that it commits injustice against no one but carries out righteousness down to a mathematical point.⁷

For no matter how happy and well-ordered the other kingdoms may be, they have countless shortcomings to such an extent that it is impossible to find a single government that is not beset

⁷ According to Greek mathematician, Euclid (c. 435-365 B.C.), a mathematical point has no part and therefore no extension in the physical world. As a result, it is not divisible.

by very many and very great sins. For they are all stained by tyranny, unwisdom, negligence, by all evil lusts of ambition, unchastity, revenge, and greed. By necessity, the one who governs must commit injustice against the people. This is why there is the command that we should pray for the government (1 Tim. 2:1-2), because it is impossible for it to govern without shortcomings. This is also why philosophers debate whether kingdoms may be governed without injustice, whether it is more tolerable if a government is just or unjust. Plato and Cicero, however, conclude that kingdoms cannot be governed without injustice and lies.

Yet in Christ's kingdom there is no shortcoming, no injustice is committed or tolerated, not even in the smallest detail. Yet this injustice takes place in the kingdoms of the world—not in small details but in large quantities. For there you see immense oceans and monsters of injustice, which cannot be prevented, not even by those who govern well. For David was a holy king and governed with God's assistance and favor, as Peter attests in Acts 13:22 that David governed the kingdom according to God's will. And in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 13:14; 1 Kings 14:8), God says: "I have found a man who is to do my will." Nonetheless, David has committed injustice against many, for instance against the poor orphan Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 16:4; 19:22), against Uriah whom he commanded to be killed (2 Sam. 11:15) to take his wife.

To put it briefly, it is impossible for those who govern not to sin. They are also unable to do justice to all. The reason is that they are overcome by the magnitude of the task and the malice of the devil. But it is sufficient if they do not sin deliberately or intentionally but have the intention to administer their governmental office well. The things that by chance go differently than they would like are expunged and blotted out by the forgiveness of sins. Otherwise, who would want to be employed in governing a community? But Scripture commands us to forget and cover the sins of the rulers. We are prohibited from seeing the specks in the eyes of the princes.

It is no surprise that this happens to those who govern in the political realm. Even we, the servants of the Word, encounter the same things. For there is no one among us who is able to administer his office without many shortcomings. Since, then, the most praiseworthy kings in God's holy people could not lead the government without sin—such as David, Hezekiah, and others—it is impossible for there to be anybody who always does his duty, who does not at times commit injustice against those who are innocent by killing, robbing, raging, and showing the virtues of tyrants against them—and who then does not turn around, pretending to be kind and favorable toward the citizens. This is what Julius Caesar and others did, who had the ability to rage while still having the skill to draw the hearts of the people to themselves.

This, then, is the sum of this: All other kings are to some extent tyrants who do not have a straight scepter. Their government is not carried out without shortcomings or evil deeds and tyranny, as we see in the best kings, such as David and others. But Christ alone has a straight scepter in his kingdom. Why is that? Because our King has the Word of God, which is pure down to a mathematical point.

But you know that Aristotle, in his *Ethics*, compares ethical matters to physical points instead of mathematical points. A lawyer who adjudicates a matter does not hit upon the mathematical point or that which is invisible. It is enough that he hits the target, the closer to the bullseye, the better.

Even if he does not hit the bullseye, it is enough that he does not miss the target altogether. For in ethical matters of justice and injustice, the bullseye is two feet in diameter, while the target is as big as a city. If one does this, one will not miss the target altogether. For there are no laws that are without flaws, and there is no king who governs without injustice. But it is enough that the laws of the kings attempt to hit the target lest they miss it completely.

Studying law is therefore an infinite subject, because it seeks the physical and divisible point. It is therefore necessary that many books are written about it. For an exception emerges as soon a law is enacted. And this one exception is followed by ten more, and so on and so forth into infinity. As a result, laws cannot be enacted down to a mathematical and indivisible point. For there are always cases and circumstances which make the laws deficient or require their amendment. This is why civil righteousness and civil laws are deficient in themselves, even when the people obey them. For reason cannot grasp the diversity of cases that may happen in such a way that it would ever become unnecessary to amend the law. This is why they confess with one accord that it is necessary that equity must be added to the laws, that it is necessary to mend and adjust it. As a result, the laws and civil righteousness truly are like a beggar's coat held together by many different patches of cloth. Due to the diversity of the cases, civil laws must be changed and improved by adding and taking away.

Thus, when the dominions and kingdoms of the world are compared in this matter with the kingdom of Christ, they are utterly nothing. This is why the prophet, among the other praiseworthy things, adds this one: "Your scepter is a straight scepter." For Christ's kingdom allows no shortcoming for two reasons. First, due the manner of the divine law, as we submit to having our sins judged and reproved by it. For although Christ tolerates our sins in our life, he does not tolerate them in his law and in doctrine. Rather, Christ's law is perfectly pure and kills sin completely. His law also does not allow any circumstances or accidents to interfere with this judgment, as it says in Rev. 21:27, that nothing impure will enter Jerusalem. Second, due the manner of our head and King, Christ, in whom we believe. For as far as Christ is concerned, there is nothing deficient in us. But as far as we are concerned, we are completely impure and full of evil lust, fear of death, and despair. Christ, however, is not like us in this regard, as it is written of him (Isa. 53:9; 1 Peter 2:22): "No deceit was found in his mouth." Thus, when we believe in him, we are regarded as absolutely righteous for his sake. Later, after the death of this flesh, we will reach the mathematical point of righteousness in the life to come have in us this absolute righteousness. Now, while we believe in Christ, we have this righteousness only by way of imputation on account of the merit of Christ. Then, however, when this will be revealed in the future life, this entire tyranny of death will be gone, so that no fear, no anguish will be able to cling to us. Then everything will be perfectly secure and joyful. In this life, however, we have these things under the shadow and under the cover of the wings of the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2; Ps. 17:8) and are righteous only through faith for his sake. But then we will also be truly righteous in ourselves.

Christ's is therefore a straight scepter because the doctrine of Christ and the laws of this King are perfectly straight and completely pure, namely, that we are to believe in Christ and love God and the neighbor. There is no flaw in this law. But in us, there are flaws because we do not believe

enough, do not love enough, are not strong enough in distress. Nonetheless, because we are under Christ, our shadow, who loves God and humans purely, we enjoy his benefits and are regarded as holy already in this life.

Thus, there is, firstly, no flaw in the law, no bend in the scepter. For pure is the Word that promises grace and teaches to love God. The straightness of the scepter consists in this purity. Secondly, there is also no flaw in us—first as to our head, because Christ destroys our sins, and second as to the future life, when the righteousness will be revealed which we now believe. This is what the prophet extolls and praises in this verse. This is why he prefers by far this one King over all the other kings, whether they be David or Solomon or Hezekiah. For they are unable to govern their kingdoms without foolishness and obvious flaws. For instance, Hezekiah foolishly boasts before God: “O Lord, remember that I have faithfully walked before you” (2 Kings 20:3). Foolishly, he also boasts before the emissaries of the king of Babylon (Isa. 39:1ff.). Josiah is killed because of a single error (2 Chron. 35:21ff.). In short, since the beginning of the world, all kings—even the best—ruled their kingdoms not without serious mistakes and injustice.

This serves to teach you to understand that the civil government cannot be administered without sin. Several raging preachers and the mob do not know this. It’s easy for them to make a big deal out of the mistakes of the princes and kings. This too is a special deceit of Satan: We easily see, and pay attention to, the shortcomings of the princes. Some peasant—he lived like a pig for twenty years or more and never paid any attention to one of his own sins—shows amazing eloquence when it comes to calling out some minor sin of his prince. All the while, he is engaged in massive sins of his own.

This is why you, who one day will take on government offices or lead a congregation, should prepare to say this: Dear Lord God, we too have the name to cover. And we too, as it says in the common proverb, are like horse dung swimming among apples, if our ruling is compared to this straight scepter. For it is impossible to avoid all mistakes.

Now, when you see these mistakes in others, learn not to rave with the mob. Instead, learn to excuse the mistakes, to bear them patiently, and to forgive them, especially when those who hold high places are not bad people who sin deliberately but are people who are gladly careful in all matters, even though they do not always succeed. We should not attack them as enemies. For that would mean teaching in a rebellious manner and, as Peter puts it in 2 Peter 2:10, blaspheming the majesties. Indeed, if you can overlook and cover your shortcomings, why then do you not overlook their shortcomings, especially since you should do this, according to God’s Word.

Why do you not say instead: It is said about Christ’s kingdom: “Your scepter is a straight scepter.” This is the prerogative of this kingdom, which other kingdoms do not have. This is why patience is necessary in the kingdoms of the world and in secular government.

No doubt, Nebuchadnezzar was a good and reasonable person, but just look how cruel he ordered people to be thrown to the lions! Alexander was busy accomplishing outstanding feats, but how did he treat his friends? The same is true for Augustus. In short, review the histories, and you will see that all kings had some kind of shortcoming. All of them frequently and dangerously offended. And is it surprising that humans fail in the administration of a state, as there is no

greater work in civil life? Only consider your household carefully—or if you do not have one, take a wife and govern your own household—and see whether your wife, children, and servants carry out everything according to your orders.

This why this verse only applies to Christ's kingdom: "Your scepter is a straight scepter." In the case of all others who are in government, these sins are taken away by the forgiveness of sins for which we ask in the holy Our Father. But although the church has wrinkles and blemishes, it is nonetheless holy and without any blemish in its head (Eph. 5:26-27). For Christ is without blemish. Thus, he who believes in him is also without blemish, but through faith. Moreover, the law is also pure; the promise is pure. We too are pure but only partially so.

Accordingly, the scepter is straight everywhere. And no injustice is done to the people of Christ because it is ruled by the pure Word. But this is what you should learn diligently: When you consider the Church and government according to their outward appearance, you see that they are not completely pure. And you must put on this attitude that one must tolerate shortcomings in the household management, in government, and in the Church.

Those who do not wish to do so, should go live in a different world! For they are inexperienced, conceited, and uncouth people who do not know anything and have not seen anything. If these people were permitted to govern where they criticize others, they would be no more successful in governing than Phaeton who tried to steer the course of sun, since he thought it had never properly been steered before. He criticized the government of his father Helios, the sun god. When he was permitted to govern, he almost ruined everything. This is exactly what those who are inclined to judge others do, as several false brothers did among us. They are complete asses who understand nothing. All they teach is how the matter should be done, "how it's supposed to be." But that's the easy part. I too know how to do that, even better than they. But to carry out correctly what has been ordered correctly—that requires true skill! And that is also where we fail for the most part. Those asses do not know this. This is why all their learning can do is to criticize what others do.

When considering the Church, we must keep apart this life and the future life. When considering the government, we must distinguish the laws and the life—both of which are deficient—from this kingdom of Christ. In government, it is enough to accomplish *something*, because, as is said, one cannot go beyond that. Let them do as much as they can. But to do it all perfectly—as the young rulers think—is impossible. The young rulers want to strike eleven bowling pins, although only nine have been set up. In Erfurt, I saw some who ruled this way, but they were hanged and decapitated because they dared to rule based on their ideas, not knowing that the devil is in the world.

But I say all this against the rebellious opinions of raging people who do know anything besides, as they call it, "reforming" and rebuking other people. Absalom was just like them. He denigrated his father David and stood on the road by the gate every day (2 Sam. 15), saying: "I hear that your cause just, if only you had a just judge. But nothing is done right at my father's court. I should be king!" But the outcome of this episode teaches how he succeeded.

Those who wish to restore a governmental person who has fallen, should do this, in the first place, before God in prayer. Then they should humbly offer their advice, freely and openly, not by spreading gossip and loose talk in secret corners among rebellious people. Those who have the office of the Word may rebuke governmental persons, but they should do so with restraint, so that it is done without instigating a rebellion. They should also instruct the people that the government—as well as household management—cannot be administered without sin, and that these sins are later covered by the forgiveness of sins.

In the Church, however, there is no forgiveness as far as the Word is concerned. Rather, the Word is the mathematical point and the highest purity. For the Word is without blemish so that even the smallest letter in the law and the divine promises is without flaw. You must therefore not give in to any sect, not even on a single tittle of Scripture, no matter how much they scream and slander us that we injure love by firmly holding to the words. For preserving the scepter straight is the beginning of love. If the scepter cannot be kept straight without breaking love or something that is even greater, it must be done. But if this purity of the Word and the straightness of the scepter remain, I will gladly bear the life and the shortcomings of the brother in love.

This is why the government and the Church, Christ's kingdom and the kingdom of the world, must be carefully distinguished. And this distinction cannot be learned well enough: When it comes to the government, we should tolerate everything in patience and excuse it all in equity. Additionally, we should try to practice civil righteousness to the extent we are able. If that does not work out everywhere, we should say: This glory belongs to Christ alone that his scepter alone is straight, which is not the case in other kingdoms.

This, then, is the meaning of this text: "Your scepter is a straight scepter," that is, you govern all things justly because you govern by the Word, which must be the greatest straightness and righteousness. This is why all our sins to the least are here condemned, but they are condemned in such a way that God intends to cleanse them completely through the forgiveness of sins and to eradicate them completely through death—and to do all this for the sake of Christ. If I look to him in faith as the one who took away all my sins by his death, God declares me to be righteous and pure for the sake of Christ, my head, who is most purely pure.

Accordingly, the Church too is pure, although it is full of sins in itself. Now, if you see other things—namely, that evil desires raise their heads, such as, timidity, sadness, negligence of the Word—you should say: In itself, the Church is impure as far the old Adam is concerned. But it is purified by the scepter. This scepter kills the old Adam daily. Thus, when we die and are buried and are burned with fire on the Last Day, then we will rise as pure people, just as our scepter is pure. Now we are not yet pure but are made pure. And, as the Aristotelians say, we are saints in becoming (*in fieri*) but not yet saints in having become (*in facto*).