

Sermon 176: Obeying and Disobeying the Government

OUTLINE

Civil disobedience
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INTRODUCTION

Michael Cassidy, the founder of African Enterprise visited P W Botha in South Africa on October the 8th 1985. 'It was the time of the National Initiative for Reconciliation, and Michael hoped for signs of repentance and for assurance that apartheid would be dismantled. He was to be bitterly disappointed. This is his account of what happened: 'I was immediately aware on entry to the room that this was not to be the sort of encounter for which I had prayed. The President began by standing to read me part of Romans 13.'¹ One of the verses that was read was Romans 13:2 which talks about the responsibility of every person to obey the government. Romans 13:2, 'Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.' This is one of the more abused verses in the bible.

Paul has just given us two positive reasons for why every person should submit to the government in verse 1, God has created government authority; and He has providentially brought even the bad governments to rule. In verse 2 Paul draws the necessary inference and gives a negative reason for everyone to submit. The inference is that if God ordains government, and the ones we are presently under then, by inference, to resist the government is to resist God. And those who do resist God in this way will suffer, in the words of the KJV, 'damnation.' Paul has left no doubt as to our responsibility, twice he has emphasized everyone and he has argued for it with both positive and negative motivations.

For those of you who are familiar with Puritan history you will know that the English Civil War of the 17th century was fought about how one interprets Romans 13:1-7. There was the notion of the divine right of kings where a monarch appointed by God was responsible to none but God, these were called the Royalists. And opposing them were the Parliamentarians that believed the kings power exists by agreement, or social contract. The view that saw God as appointing the King directly, and the apparent call from Romans 13:2 to obey unconditionally led many monarchs to assert their wills in violation of the consciences of their people. Does Paul mean by these verses what those who believed in the divine right of kings believed? Are bad governments given carte blanche to do what they like and we just have to submit? How do we understand Romans 13:2? Is there a time to disobey? More than that is there a time to revolt and overthrow bad governments?

Upon our first reading of Romans 13:1-2 you might get the impression that all bad governments are to be tolerated and obeyed no matter what, but this would be to misunderstand Paul's purpose here in writing. Paul is making a summarised positive assertion that governments are good and should be obeyed. He is not writing an exhaustive essay on all the different types of governments and how we are to respond in every situation. Remember the need in Rome is a positive view of government, Rome is generally perceived as bad and Paul is balancing an imbalance in their thinking. It is only people with a particular agenda who would isolate these verses from the rest of what the bible says on

¹ John Stott, Romans, p341.

the matter. Paul being a Jew with a background in the OT would have many examples of when not to obey a bad command given from a government.

Today we want to do three things. We want to look at civil disobedience, when it is necessary and what it looks like; then we want to look at the notion of revolution, and then finally we want to make a few disclaimers to placate our agitation.

Civil disobedience

Before we get talking about when we should not obey, let's take Paul's point first. Government is good and Christians should be good citizens of the land. Christians are not laws unto themselves like the Anchorites who separated themselves and lived in deserts. Christians are those who recognise and treat with authorities with respect because they are put there by God. This means that we give respect to whom respect is due. We do not call the police 'pigs', we do not disrespect our teachers at school, we do not head-butt former Prime Ministers because we are of a certain political view. We are not agitators who are constantly stirring discontent and those who trash talk our leaders. But for all this there is also a time to disobey.

Talking about obeying the Government, Sproul has written, 'Anytime a civil government requires a Christian to do what God forbids or forbids what God commands, then a person must disobey.' We must emphasize that the way we disobey is always respectful and not with a view to overthrowing authority altogether. We are not anarchists but those who are seeking to uphold God's law not assert our own. 'In a nationally televised debate [Martin Luther] King stated in response to some of his critics that the individual 'who discovers on the basis of conscience that a law is unjust and is willing in a very peaceful sense to disobey that unjust law and willingly and voluntarily suffers the consequences...is expressing the highest respect for law.'²

The bible has many examples of disobedience done in order to obey God.

Think of Exodus 1:15-22 where the Jewish mid-wives are commanded by Pharaoh to murder the Jewish baby boys. They did not obey when the government ordered them to sin.

Think of 1 Samuel 22:17 when Saul commanded his men to murder the priests at Nob, they too rightly disobeyed.

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were commanded to bow down to an idol they risked their own lives in disobedience to the government but obedience to God.

In Daniel six when the ruler forbids anyone from praying to their gods, we see Daniel whose practice it was pray three times a day continues to pray to God despite the commands of the government.

In Acts 4:19-20 we hear Peter answering the Sanhedrin who commanded the apostles not to preach, 'But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.'" And again in Acts 5:29, 'But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.'

These are major sins that the government required of God's people either by way of omission or commission. Let's take a matter that is of a lower magnitude, the spanking of children. It is very clear in scripture that spanking is an act of godly discipline that is for the child's good. Proverbs 29:15, 'The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself

2 John Jefferson David, Evangelical Ethics, p191.

brings shame to his mother.' Yet here in NZ parents are no longer allowed to legally discipline in this fashion. Must every parent disobey the government and discipline their children? Would parents be sinning if they did not? Must those who seek to foster forego fostering because governments will regulate this aspect of your parenting? Must parents be martyrs for the sake of disciplining their children in this fashion? Because this is a lower order matter which can take second place to say parents being present instead of the children being removed from the home. And because there is more than one way to discipline, where murder is murder and idolatry is idolatry, the matter will have to be worked by individual families. We cannot do what GV has done and say that discipline is an OT concept that goes away with the NT, the purpose of the law is to restrain sin in both the old and new testaments. But we also cannot compare this matter to more important ones where Christians have no other alternatives but to disobey.

So let me say this. I believe a Christian can opt to obey this unbiblical demand because they prioritise the fact that the children should not be removed from the home and would rather have this restriction with the children present than have an idealistic practice with no family anymore. But on the other hand there may be circumstances where the rod ought to be applied as a form of discipline. In this case disobey the government but do so with wisdom. Most of your spanking should be done by the age of 7. Beware, if your child tells another who reports it to their parents, and it gets reported, this is one area where the government is zealous to show itself diligent. We can welcome this restriction as well. Too often the rod has been seen as a cure all, and as a result a one size fits all approach has been taken. Not only that other biblical forms of correction such as teaching and rebuke have been neglected the detriment of the parenting relationship.

Disobeying the government in order to obey God is usually a black and white case and easy to answer. However since the rise of the civil rights movement we are challenged by another form of disobedience to the government called civil disobedience. Gandhi taking a page from the bible used the teaching about turning the other cheek as a political tactic to overturn oppression. He stressed the non-violent nature of his protests. In India no one was allowed to buy salt except from the British monopoly, Gandhi's protest took the form of making his own salt from boiling sea water. India was finally liberated. This became a model which was taken up by people like Baptist preacher Martin Luther King Jr. Black people all over America would disobey racist rules that forbid black people from sitting in certain places on buses or certain counters to be served a meal. This led on to the Hippy protests against Vietnam and soon a culture of protest arose. The general assumption today is that protesting and disturbing the peace is a basic human right. Are Christians to embrace this culture of protest as a vehicle for change? Does it square with the bible's teaching on submitting to the rulers? Can groups like Operation Rescue break trespassing laws and bar the way to abortion clinics?

The answers to these questions are not simple. Some Christians are against such tactics and others are for it. Let me give a hesitant and qualified yes. The bible is very clear on matters that relate to our worship and service of God but there are no examples of proactive activity of resisting government to promote the general well-being of others. In the first century non-violent protest would not have been distinguished from revolt, and would have been crushed as sedition. But because we live in a democratic environment we have more options open to us. And biblically speaking we must admit that there is a responsibility to do what is in our power to aid our oppressed neighbour. Can a Christian trespass an abortion clinic? A Christian could think to themselves that the unborn have no voice and no defender and so someone else will have to take physical action to prevent their deaths. A Christian should not assassinate the abortion doctor as one man did, but a non-moral law

such as trespassing could be broken to serve this end. Here are some general principles I have borrowed from ethicist John Jefferson Davis³ as a guide to how and when Christians should disobey the government.

1. When the law being resisted is unjust or immoral. In other words we do not disobey laws that we find inconvenient, e.g. low speed limits; laws that we find burdensome, like some tax laws; or laws that we deem to be unreasonable. These would be self-serving reasons for disobedience but we are carving out a place for disobedience in the service of others not self. In South Africa we have seen protests by students about education fees that have led to the burning down of the school or university. High School fees are not an immoral law that merit the destruction of the institution that you are seeking to get an education from.
2. One should see this as a measure of last resort after all other possible channels for creating change have been exhausted. If we follow this principle closely I believe that Christians will not be quick to protest but slow. In our democratic climate we have many opportunities to bring about change through things like writing to your MP, petitioning the government, writing an article for the newspaper, starting an awareness group, etc. Right now we have a wonderful opportunity to use this liberty. Family first have provided literature that pertains to the euthanasia bill, and submissions must be made before the 20th of this month. Do you want to see something done? Don't protest, use these other avenues open to you. There are forms at the back of the church. Educate yourself about how you can create change within a democracy and channel your anger into those efforts.
3. Civil disobedience must be public and not clandestine. This is very important because we are not hiding our disobedience we are broadcasting it to bring about change. We are not ashamed of our actions but we believe them to be right. Those who disobey the government but do it secretly are usually criminals, one of the differences between crime and civil disobedience is this public aspect.
4. There should be a likelihood of success, and an effect that outweighs the costs involved. For example some people have withheld part of their taxes to make a statement that they do not want their taxes to support abortion. However, this does not guarantee that your other taxes will not still serve that end. Also, if a man who is supporting a family is put in jail for a time in order to make this sort of a statement, are the costs incurred in family life and stability worth it? Things to consider in civil disobedience are will this action cause inordinate social disruption; promote lawlessness; and result in a loss of freedom. A Christian must also consider the effect on the person or people that you are protesting against. Naming and shaming someone could result in a loss of finances that a family loses their provision. Christians should be the most thoughtful in this regard.
5. If you take this action then you should do it being willing to take the consequences.

I would like to add that the issue of civil disobedience in these cases is one of conscience. It is up to the individual believer whether he wants to rely primarily on prayer and evangelism to bring about change or if he feels he must take more physical and political action. Christian consciences may differ on what the proper response may be, and we must allow for this and not bully one another into these actions. The sinner in these situations would be the one who doesn't care, not the one who shows care by differing actions.

Other actions of civil disobedience that have been endorsed by Christians are things like smuggling bibles into Russia; and hiding Jews from the Germans.

³ Davis, p196-198.

Revolution

Christians are to be those who exemplify being good citizens, but what if the government becomes criminal and breaks the law in perpetual and costly ways? Can Christians be part of a political uprising that overthrows a government? Karl Marx believed that revolution was the way to progress, that a violent uprising is the only way to move forward. However, even some secular thinkers are against revolution. French philosopher Albert Camus said, 'the means employed...represent so enormous a risk and are so disproportionate to the slender hopes of success, that in all sober objectivity, we must refuse to run this risk.'⁴ The French Revolution with its reign of terror and Russian revolution seem compelling reasons not to risk revolution.

In Christian thought John Calvin is seen to be an important thinker who laid the foundation for a lawful revolution. He was against anarchy but insisted that other legitimate authorities such as magistrates or princes could resist and overthrow a wicked ruler. It has been felt that Christians can embrace this legitimate use of means in toppling evil rulers. It is usually felt that the right of lawful revolt proceeds on the same grounds as a just war. In order to defend the weak one must resist the wicked. So once again it should be seen as a last resort, it should be done through other legitimate authorities, it must be for a just cause, the power in question must be very wicked and the action of revolt warrant the high costs, there should be a reasonable hope of victory and it must be rightly conducted, i.e. no torture, rape, vigilantism, etc.

Let me clarify though that this action is done by Christians in their capacity as citizens who are part of the armed forces or some other legitimate wing of active service in the government, this is not a church activity but a private one done decently and in order. It is not the sanctioning of a lynchmob.

Christian disclaimers

Entering into the questions of disobedience we have followed our questions but left the concern of the text. The overarching point that we need to stress is that we are good citizens of the country we are in. As 21st century people we are highly sensitized to my individual rights, my right to protest, my freedom of speech, and my inalienable human rights. In the midst of this we can lose sight of the fact that we are under authority should love God by submitting. So to end all this talk about disobedience and revolt let me stress some important Christian disclaimers.

Firstly, the bible commends us when we patiently endure suffering for doing good. 1 Pet. 3:13-17, 'Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.' Silence not protest, good works not rioting is to be our natural tongue.

Secondly, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal. God has not given us democratic rights to promote his kingdom but prayer and evangelism. We must beware of political activism as it very soon overtakes gospel interests and distracts from the gospel. It is very

⁴ Davis, p201.

easy to become more emotionally committed to abortion and euthanasia and not people going to hell.

Thirdly, Christians understand, or at least they should understand the purpose of government. Governments exist to institute law and enforce it. And Christians know the power of the law. It can restrain evil but it cannot change hearts. It can create a temporary order but cannot create the new kingdom. Our confidence is not in political action but the power of the Spirit to change hearts.

Fourthly, our commitment to gospel preaching is a ministry of setting free the oppressed and captives of the devil. The world may see evil in the bad governments of this world and get caught up in political activism. But the Christian knows that there are spiritual realities which are much more significant. Every person is a slave and imprisoned under sin, we are all born sinners who must answer for our crimes against God. We are harassed by the devil and we continually do ourselves harm. We lie to ourselves, hurt one another and ourselves. We are mad for we even hurt ourselves to hurt our loved ones. We are in bondage in ourselves, under the law and under the devil. But Jesus has come to set us free. In the first place He has died for our sins to pay the debt of our sins, and one day He will come again to undo all the other effects of sin. So until then the church is not obsessed with political action though it seeks to be responsible. The church knows that there is a bigger problem than our political ones. And so the church is willing to endure inconveniences, persecutions, and even unjust laws and treatment as it pushes on in the task of making the gospel available to all.