

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

When is it time to defy the government?

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INTRODUCTION

Open your Bible to Romans 13 this morning.

Romans 13 has been a passage of Scripture that has become the focus of much debate within the church, as well as outside the church. Many are focusing on Romans 13 as a reason for submission to the governing authorities – and they should! That is exactly what the text is talking about.

This passage establishes the authority of government as the authority of God – which makes it difficult to go against the government's authority without going against God's authority.

The problem, though, is that this text is often used in a manner that is not consistent with the rest of Scripture.

So on the one hand, those who want to defy the government at every turn are quick to pull out the exception clauses and ignore the plain meaning of the text. But on the other hand, those who are vying for total submission to the government often cut Romans 13 from Scripture's larger context.

As we seek to understand the meaning and significance of Romans 13, it is also important to consider the governmental structure within which we find ourselves. What I am referring to is the unique structure of the United States of America.

Remember, this nation that we live in is a nation that was founded by the people, for the people, and with a government of the people. Which means that, in part, we are the government. And this reality rightly influences our understanding and application of this passage.

As I preach this message on Sunday May 24, we know that tomorrow is Memorial Day. It is a day here in the United States when we remember those who fought and died so that we would have a nation that is free – primarily, so that we can practice religion without interference from the ruling officials.

And yet, here we are in the middle of a struggle – in states across our nation – as to the validity of those rights. There is an increasing push to suggest that the freedoms and rights in the Constitution should be suspended for the greater good. But there is ambiguity here: what is ‘the greater good’ and gets to define it? There is the claim that the declared public health emergency should trump our freedoms. And for the most part, that is a civil question – to be decided in the civil realm.

Even so, we are the church – and we are Christians first! In fact, I am fiercely a Christian first before I am a citizen of a particular earthly country! I am a citizen of God’s kingdom before I am a citizen of the United States of America. And yet, as American citizens, we not only have responsibilities to the government, but we are in a very real sense part of the government.

So, how do I respond to all of this? How do we honor the Governor and obey God at the same time? Do we fall in line and submit fully to the governing authorities? Or do we rally and rebel? Is there somewhere in the middle?

Someone might ask: Does it really matter at this point? I mean, it is not like our churches are being closed or we are being forced to bow down to a pagan god. Does it matter yet? Why defy the Governor over such a small matter? Shouldn’t we wait until a catastrophic or extreme violation of our rights occurs before choosing the path of defiance?

When I consider this, I am reminded of the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – the German pastor and theologian killed by the Nazis. He said, “If you board the wrong train it is no use running along the corridor in the opposite direction.” This is one of my favorite quotes of all time! Here’s the point: If we don’t consider this issue now, there may be a day when we find that we have boarded the wrong train.

So the question that I want to look at this morning is: *How do we honor the Governor and obey God?*

THE SCRIPTURAL TEXT

Stand with me as I read the Word of God:

“¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” (Romans 13:1-7)

THE BASIC COMMAND TO SUBMIT

Taking this text at face value reveals to us the general order that God has established. We are to submit to the governments that rule over us, because they are established by God. That is, we are to willfully rank under them for the benefit of a functioning society. Everything functions better with order and structure.

We also learn that everyone is to submit. There are not exceptions as to who has to obey the laws of the land and who does not. We do not get to pick and choose which laws and rules apply to us, and which ones do not apply to us. Paul says that everyone must submit to governing authorities.

FIVE REASONS TO SUBMIT TO THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES

I want to quickly give you five reasons from the text as to why we should submit to the governing authorities.

Reason 1: Governments are Established by God (v. 1)

The first reason to submit to governments is because governments are established by God. As it says in verse 1:

“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (Romans 13:1)

God is the One who raises up kings and removes kings. The government exists by God’s will, and it exists to do God’s bidding. Do not be deceived into thinking that men have risen to power outside of the divine and sovereign plan of God.

Reason 2: Resisting Government is Resisting What God Has Established (v. 2)

The second reason to submit to governments is because resisting governments is resisting what God has established. Verse 2 says:

“Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed” (Romans 13:2).

Since God established their position and power, resisting them is tantamount to resisting God. Your refusal to obey the laws of the land is a direct refusal to obey the law of God. That is how we are to treat the rule of law – as though it is the rule of God.

Reason 3: Government is for our Good (v. 3-4)

The third reason to submit to government is because government is for our good. Look at verses 3-4:

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good.” (Romans 13:3-4)

Government is in place to maintain order and safety. It has been established to restrain the sinfulness of man. Our nation is not a good nation because we are made up of good-hearted people. Instead, our nation is a good nation because we have laws and law enforcement – and these restrain the heart of man. Our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. When there are no consequences for crime,

crime expands. Therefore, government has been established to provide rules and guidelines. It has been established to wield justice. This is for our good as it helps to restrain the sinfulness of man.

Reason 4: The Consequences for Insubordination (v. 4b)

The fourth reason to submit to government is because of the consequences for insubordination. Look at verse 4b:

“But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4b)

The government “is the servant of God” to wield justice against the evildoer. If you break the law, you pay the fine! The sword is not wielded in vain. There are consequences for evil conduct. The consequences provide motivation for obedience. The consequences protect us from greater sin. The consequences are often painful.

Conclusion

So, we are to submit to and obey the governing authorities, which make and enforce laws for our good. That is the general ‘take it at face value’ overview of the passage.

WAIT A MINUTE!

Now, you may be wondering and thinking: ‘This is a strange passage to teach on a Sunday when we are technically in violation of the Governor’s orders.’

Up until Thursday of this past week, the Governor had made it a violation of his Executive Orders to gather for worship in houses of worship and in homes. This past Thursday, the Governor loosened his grip on the church by allowing up to 10 people to gather for worship. And now we are sitting here – exceeding the Governor’s orders of 10 people. So Romans 13 seems like a strange passage to preach from!

But there are a few more things to consider here. There are some exceptions to the general obligation to obey the government. One exception is when a government inverts its responsibility. Remember, the government is to reward

good and punish evil (1 Peter 2:14, Romans 13:3-4). The governing authorities are servants of God for good (Romans 13:4). When the government inverts its responsibility, it rewards evil and punishes good.

So what do we do when a government begins to reward evil and punish good? Across our nation we are seeing a concerning trend. People are being punished for opening up their businesses in order to feed their families. People are being punished for opening up their hair salons and barber shops. Gym owners are being threatened with arrest if they open their doors for business. These small businesses are seeking to do good, but the government is punishing them or threatening to punish them.

And church parking lots are being blocked off – and parishioners are given tickets for practicing religion. The incitement of this has led to vandalism and arson. There is a church building that has been burned to the ground. Small businesses that open are being publicly shamed. We are being encouraged to gather for commerce while being forbidden from gathering for worship.

Where is the line?

Now, some will argue that these are not unreasonable laws. But I would counter by asking: where is the line? If you are going to tell me that we haven't crossed the line, then tell me where the line is. At what point do we cross the line? At what point do we realize that we have gotten on the wrong train?

Do we wait until we are a land like North Korea where it is illegal to worship God? I assure you that the church in North Korea is gathering to worship God – but they're not doing it publicly, lest they be killed.

Do we wait until we are a land like China? It is legal there to have a Christian church, even a large church, and to gather together – so long as the church ascribes to the government's guidelines. Where is the line?

Fortunately for us, our founding fathers had experienced tyranny – and from their experience they drafted the Constitution of this land and amended it with the Bill of Rights. They set to guard the inalienable rights that have been granted by God – rights that have been guarded, not only by the ink of the pen, but by the blood

of men. On Memorial Day we remember the men and women who gave their lives in order to guard our freedoms.

Religious freedom is a precious freedom – and our Constitution recognizes and protects it. Our Constitution’s First Amendment declares: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

A BRIEF SURVEY OF HISTORY

A cursory search through history will reveal many governments that should be resisted and not supported – because they are rewarding evil and punishing good.

Draco of Ancient Greece

First, let’s consider Draco. Perhaps you have heard the term “Draconian laws” in reference to the government’s overreach. The term is in reference to Draco – ruler in ancient Greece (around 621BC). His constitution was filled with harsh laws that were overbearing in their scope and punishment. Nearly every law carried the death-penalty for violators. In fact, it is said that his constitution was not written with ink, but with blood. No matter how severe our laws are and no matter how broad our government’s overreach is, they are not technically draconian – unless you are an unborn baby.

Vlad of Wallachia

Second, let’s consider Vlad the III. Vlad the III was Prince of Wallachia (modern-day Romania) ruling from 1456-1462. In that brief time, he set himself up as one of history’s most brutal rulers. His nickname was ‘Vlad the Impaler’ – because he liked to impale his foes. In one raid he impaled all 20,000 residents of a conquered city. There was no measure of imaginable torture that he did not delight in. He would commonly indulge in feasting while he had people brutally tortured to death – as if it was entertainment for the meal.

Pol Pot of Cambodia

Third, let’s consider Pol Pot. Pol Pot was the Prime Minister of Cambodia from 1976 to 1979. During his time in power, his radical communist government forced the mass evacuations of cities – killing or displacing millions of people, and leaving a legacy of disease and starvation. Under his leadership, his government caused

the deaths of at least one million people from forced labor, starvation, disease, torture, or execution.

Adolf Eichmann of Nazi Germany

Fourth, let's consider Adolf Eichmann. Adolf Eichmann was a Nazi SS Lt. Col. during World War II. He was the major organizer of the Holocaust. He was responsible for funneling Jews into the ghettos, concentration camps, and gas chambers. At one time he bragged, "I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of 5 million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction." He was an evil man – punishing good and rewarding evil.

What should we do in these kinds of situations?

At the present time, China, North Korea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and many other countries have laws that make it illegal to freely and publicly worship the living God. And we are teetering on that! In such countries, Christians are targeted and killed, and pastors are arrested with regularity for violating these laws. Are they wrong to disobey the laws of the land? Should we submit to authorities placed in position by God that commit such atrocities? Should we stand idly by based upon Romans 13 and say, 'Well, these are the authorities that have been put in place by God – and even if these authorities are acting wrongly, we must not resist them'? Is that how we should think and act?

Standing idly by is what many churches in Germany did during the 1930s. Whole denominations stood on Romans 13 and watched as the Nazis rose to power and the Holocaust unfolded. Is this what the apostle Paul had in mind? I am convinced that it is not!

SCRIPTURAL EXCEPTIONS TO OBEYING THE GOVERNMENT

Consider the Scriptures that seem to show some exceptions. If Romans 13 is meant to be 'hard and fast' with no exceptions, then it would be contradictory to the rest of Scripture. For some Scriptural passages show that the government's authority is not absolute, and that there are exceptions. Romans 13 should be understood and applied with these other passages in mind. So let's consider the Scriptures that indicate that there are certain times and situations where it is acceptable or even expected that we violate the law of the land.

Example One: Exodus 1

First, let's consider the midwives of Exodus 1. The context is that the nation of Israel is growing in the land of Egypt, and Pharaoh is fearful that he could lose his empire if they join the enemy. So he instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill all the baby boys that are born. Pharaoh gave this order:

“When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” (Exodus 1:16)

“But the midwives feared God” more than they feared Pharaoh, so they violated the king's command and they did not kill the babies (Exodus 1:17). Why? Because it is against God's law to murder. Therefore they obeyed God, not the government!

So today, if the law is passed that would require all hospitals and doctors to perform abortions, Christian doctors and nurses should refuse to comply. And they should work even more diligently at preserving lives!

Example Two: Esther... and Harriet Tubman

Second, let's turn our attention to Esther. The whole book of Esther is based upon breaking of the law of the land in order to preserve the lives of many who were about to face racial genocide. Haman had convinced the king to set a day aside designated for the free killing of the Jews. On this set date it was perfectly legal to kill as many Jews as you wanted.

In light of this situation, the woman Esther did a courageous thing. Esther was the queen and he was also a Jew. She risked her life and violated the law by walking unwelcomed into the presence of the king. According to law, she could only walk into his presence if he asked for her – but if she came in uninvited, she could be killed. She risked her life and violated the law of the land to preserve the lives of many who faced racial genocide.

Racial genocide is contrary to God's laws, because God is no respecter of persons. He has created all men equal, and He has commanded that the gospel message go to ALL the world. Our God is not a racist. He does not value one tribe or people

group or skin color over another. He is the Redeemer for both the Jew and the Gentile.

A modern example of opposing racial injustice is Harriet Tubman, the 19th century abolitionist. She faced constant danger in her efforts to free African Americans from tyrant slave owners via the underground railroad. Her efforts violated the laws of the land, which said that masters had complete possession of their slaves to do with as they pleased.

Like Harriet Tubman, we are to stand up against racial inequality. Like Esther, we are to stand up against genocide. We must not be casual bystanders, but active opponents! When the law of the land is evil, we must uphold the law of God!

Example Three: Daniel 3 and Daniel 6

Third, let's remember the faithful men in the book of Daniel. Daniel 3 carries a familiar account of righteous law-breaking.

The king built a golden image, and then passed a law demanding that all people fall down and worship it every time they hear the music playing. But three young men refused to bow down to a false god. They intentionally broke the law of the land.

The teenagers Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – better remembered by their pagan names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – understood that to obey the king's law would violate God's commands. So they publicly refused to worship the golden image – and they were subsequently charged and brought before the king for his justice to be wielded in the form of a fiery furnace. They defied King Nebuchadnezzar and said to him:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, **that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.**” (Daniel 3:16-18, emphasis added)

The law clearly stated that they were to worship the false god. But they understood that God's law said that we are to have no other gods before HIM!

Turning to Daniel 6, we learn that Daniel himself found himself in a similar situation with King Darius several years later. Darius had been persuaded by several of the high ranking officials to pass a law which stipulated that for 30 days no one was permitted to petition any god or man except Darius. In other words, people could only pray to King Darius. If anyone broke the law, that person would be thrown into the lion's den to be devoured by lions. So what does Daniel do?

Scripture says:

“When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.” (Daniel 6:10)

As soon as Daniel learned that the unrighteous law had become official, he went to pray and praise and worship the Lord God Almighty. Daniel ignored the new law, and he did what he always did – he prayed publicly. He violated the evil law at the very first opportunity he had to violate it! For Daniel knew the truth: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3), says the living God.

Now there are a couple of important things to note about this.

First, Daniel did what he had always done. It was his custom and practice to pray before the open window, and to do it three times a day. This was not a reaction of rebellion toward a law he did not like. Sometimes we look for opportunities to justify our rebellion. So, while we may not normally pray, we will now, because we have been told we can't! That is NOT what Daniel is doing here. Daniel has always prayed publicly – the other governors knew that, and that is why they passed the law. They knew that he who obeyed the king's commands would not obey this one – not because he was rebellious by nature, but because he was submissive first to the God above all the earth.

Second, Daniel was intentional in his refusal to submit to the king's law. He did not hide behind closed doors or pretend that he was doing something else. He flung open the window and fell to his knees in fervent prayer to the Almighty God – and

he did this three times each day so that the whole of the land knew exactly what he was doing. His disobedience was made known to all.

We need to learn from Daniel. In our day and age – at this point in time – hiding in secret is not what we should be doing. We need to publicly declare before the governing officials that they have no authority to stop us, and that we will bow down before the living God, and that we will gather together for worship because God has commanded us to do so. Gathering for worship is our normal habit, so let's come together and let's keep the sign out front and let's broadcast it across the internet and let's fill the parking lot – because God has commanded us to gather.

Example Four: Acts 5

As a fourth and final example from the Bible, let's be reminded of what Peter and the apostles declared in Acts 5. The background is that Peter and John had been arrested for preaching the gospel, and they were instructed NOT to preach. That was the command given them by the governing authorities. But Peter and John were resolved to keep preaching. They had said to the authorities in Acts 4, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20) So they continued to preach the gospel!

Now in Acts 5 they appear before the authorities again. Listen to what Scripture says:

"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, **"We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching,** and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, **"We must obey God rather than men."**" (Acts 5:27-29, emphasis added)

"We must obey God rather than men" – this is the defining word on the exception for Romans 13.

When is there an exception to Romans 13? When is it okay to defy the government? When should you disobey the laws of the land? When obeying the

laws of the land would cause you to disobey the laws of God. “We must obey God rather than men.” Obeying God has to be our first priority.

So when God says you shall not murder, not only do we not murder babies, but we also seek to stop the practice and save millions of lives. We stand up to government and proclaim that we will not disobey God’s law. We will not endorse an evil law of the land; we will not sign off on it. And because “we the people” are the government, we have an even greater responsibility to stand up and do our part and say, “This law is an unjust law! It rewards evil and punishes good.”

When government says sexuality and gender doesn’t matter and that it can redefine marriage, we stand up and declare what authentic marriage is – and we refuse to participate in what God has deemed abominable. When government declares that preaching against homosexuality is a hate crime – we preach the truth. First and foremost, we are to be obedient to God – and we are to fling the windows wide open when we do it!

When government says that it is offensive to pray in public and that the practice must be stopped, we do what our practice has been and we pray – with our heads bowed and our eyes closed.

When the government says that it is safe to gather for commerce in Walmart to buy a TV but illegal to gather in the church for worship and prayer, then we are to stand up and resist. When the Governor says that it is safe to gather in Lowes to buy a barbecue grill but illegal to gather the church for the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Word of God, then we must defy the Governor and gather – not because we do not respect or honor the Governor, but because we respect and honor God first. We must obey God rather than man! And I would argue that really the only way to honor the Governor is to stand up and make it clear that the living God is the rightful and sovereign authority over us all.

CONCLUSION

So what do we do when we have a government that is moving in the wrong direction? How long do we wait before we stand up and speak? What is an overreach that is egregious enough to cause us to disobey? Can we disobey the Governor and still honor the Governor?

I will be the first one to say that a temporary ban on gathering is not a clear violation. It is not the same as saying that 'you cannot preach in the name of Jesus'. I don't like the gathering ban, of course. When the government said, 'The coronavirus makes gathering together dangerous', and we as church leaders said 'You're right, we'll stop gathering', that's one point. When the government steps over and says, 'You cannot gather', that's another point where they have crossed the line. And when the government continues to hold onto that restrictive measure – at some point we stand up because it is a violation. It may not be as clear as a law against preaching in the name of Jesus, but where is the line? We have to attempt to discern where the line is, because we have to make a decision about what to do.

This was the question that the German church was faced with in the 1930s. As Hitler and the Nazis rose to power, the church was regularly faced with governmental overreach. Instead of drawing a line and resisting early on, they continually acquiesced to the government based upon a faulty understanding of Romans 13. Over time they relinquished all authority until the church became a state-run, Nazi-run church.

The founding fathers of our nation wrote the Constitution to protect us from such government overreach. It is the responsibility of the citizens of the United States to stand up and protect the Constitution.

I would argue that the only way to honor the governor is to obey God. The only way to honor the Governor is to disobey those laws that violate our Constitution. This is not civil disobedience, but civil obedience – because we are obeying the Constitution, which is the law of the land.

When Ben Franklin walked out of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, it is alleged that a woman shouted: "Well Doctor, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?" To which Franklin supposedly said: "A republic, if you can keep it."

A republic is kept when the people help govern by keeping the leaders in check. This is our responsibility! I think too many Americans for too long have started to feel helpless – to feel like 'It's not in my hands, it's just the government doing this', and they are forgetting that *we are the government*. It is our responsibility to keep our leaders in check.

Now there are many who want to wield the 13th chapter of Romans as rod of iron to break the back of the church. But it is not intended to be such a rod.

In general, we want to submit to the governing authorities because they work for our good. Yes! Absolutely we want to submit to them because they work for our good. We don't want to be a thorn in the government's flesh. We don't want to constantly be a source of contention. But we are only to submit to them as long as they do not call us to violate the laws of God. That is the debate – are the governing authorities calling us to violate the laws of God when they tell us that we cannot gather? I believe that the Governor's mandates have put the church in a position in which we must choose which train to board – the one that obeys the Governor or the one that obeys God.

If you get on the Governor's train – it will do you no good to run down the corridors in the opposite direction.

May God help us all.