

The Gospel and Civil Disobedience

1 Pet 2:13-17

This morning I want us to look at what the Bible has to say concerning the issue of civil disobedience. When is it right for a Christian to disobey the government? I want to address this issue because basically everyone I know who is a believer is talking about this issue. It's certainly on the mind of every pastor I know as we all seek to faithfully shepherd the people God has placed us over.

We are on the second full month of a stay at home order from the governor of Washington and there is little hope that it will end any time soon. At what point do we disregard the governor's orders? At what point do we simply go back to work? When do we socialize freely with each other? At what point do we resume gathering every Sunday as a church? How do we think through those issues?

In just one sermon there really is no way we can cover every issue in depth. This is a high level overview of the issue of civil disobedience but my hope is that it will give you some categories to think through during this situation.

So my plan here is to break this up into 4 parts:

- 1 - I want us to see what our general posture toward governing authorities should be.
- 2 - We'll look at 2 general reasons for disobedience.
- 3 - Look at some factors in our present situation that we need to consider in this discussion.
- 4 - How do we make a biblically informed decision?

1 - General posture of Christians is that we are to be the best citizens in any country, state, region, and city we live in. We see this in many passages but look at **1 Pet. 2:13-17. Read**

I'll quote many passages like this but notice here that not only are we to be submissive but we are to **honor** the emperor. That's a good translation because it means to show high regard for someone. To esteem them **in our hearts** as important and valuable. And actually he says it twice: once for all people (including the emperor) and once for the emperor specifically. The emperor here was a terrible, wicked man - but Peter calls believers to honor him and that is not in conflict with fearing God. We can fear a perfect God and honor a wicked emperor at the exact same time.

Honoring authorities has always been difficult for God's people. But this is God's will. If you've ever wondered what God's will is for you life, one aspect we know for sure is that it's to honor our authorities and by doing good - which honors the emperor - we silence those who are foolish.

Titus 3:1-2: Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

So we submit, we're obedient, Johnny-on-the-spot for every good work, we speak evil of no one. **We speak evil of no one.** And show perfect courtesy. My mom would say: "You be nice!" "Well, they're not nice to me." The Bible says when we're reviled we bless. That doesn't mean we don't speak the truth, but it does mean we are to be very careful how we speak about our authorities.

Eccl. 5:20: Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.

Everybody's concerned about privacy with email and phones and Facebook and all the rest. You know what Solomon is saying? Our words and actions have never been safe. They have a way of getting out. And certainly they are not safe from the God who will judge us for our conduct.

Solomon says, don't even curse the king in your heart because a little bird will carry it away. What's the mascot of Twitter? It's a little bird. What do people do when they're exposed on social media? They try to scrub the past. Just know every tweet, every post, every email, every text we make - and certainly the political ones - will be called up on the day of Judgment for account. How are we doing in those areas?

Rom 13:1-7: says not only should we be subject to authorities but also says “For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

Every governing official exists because God wills them so. If God did not will it, they would not exist. So if you resist them, you resist God and will stand in judgment for your actions resisting the Living God.

Remember Pontius Pilate? Jesus said, “You would have no authority at all unless it had been given to you from above.” The man who handed over our Savior to be brutally murdered had no power except what the Father gave to him. (**John 19:11**)

Rom. 13 goes on to say that governing authorities are God’s servants - literally, deacons of God - that he has given for our good. I like what the ESV says: “They are avengers of God to carry out wrath.” Maybe you like the Marvel comic Avengers. Those are all fiction. The real avengers given by God are those who are in authority.

So Christians are pro government - not necessarily big government - but government. We’re not anarchists, we’re not terrorists, we’re not constant critics of the government, we shouldn’t be given to radical activism or rebellion for rebellion’s sake.

1 Tim 2:1-4 say we should be praying for our governing authorities because we want them to be saved. God desires all kinds of men to be saved: from kings to peasants. And part of the prayer that we should be praying is simply to live a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

That’s how God grows the Kingdom: through mundane faithfulness in the midst of a host of differing governing authorities which change all the time.

So Christians should be model citizens. The ones who cause our governing authorities - for the most part - to breathe a sigh of relief.

I sent an email to the Spokane country Sheriff this week and to my surprise he called me back the next day. And I realized as I began the conversation this guy probably gets hammered from everyone, including religious people. And I wanted to make it very clear at the outset my heart was not critical or argumentative, but I was seeking some counsel in a spirit of humility knowing that the weight of policing 500k people is more than I’ll ever understand. So if we ever cross paths again or talk again, my hope is that he’ll breathe a sigh of relief that I and our church are not antagonistic toward him.

Christians are to be the best citizens. Joseph was a model citizen to wicked Egypt and by God’s grace brought them massive blessing. Daniel was a model citizen to Babylon and by God’s grace brought them massive blessing. That’s who we are called to be. Wherever followers of Jesus are found the governing authorities - by and large - should be thankful to have us.

2 - There are 2 general reasons for disobedience. The authority of those above us is not absolute because as Christians we have dual citizenship.

Phil. 3:20: Our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Savior: the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are Christians because we follow **King** Jesus. We are part of the Kingdom of Heaven and pray that the Kingdom - and our King - would come. Every time we call Jesus Lord it is a reminder that he is the supreme, divine authority that we follow and who ultimately supersedes every other authority. King Jesus died for our sins, rose for our justification, ascended to heaven where he sits on his throne - right now - ruling over the cosmos and all will give a final account to him when he comes.

So we have this dual citizenship reality and sometimes it’s tricky. It’s like having a job at your dad’s company where your dad is the CEO, but you’re under managers and supervisors. You know the owner personally,

but you're also to obey others below him. Our Father is in heaven ruling over all, and yet we are called to submit to lesser authorities who have never been perfect and often have been very bad.

So let's look at some general reasons that Christians might disobey.

1 & 2 - Christians are to obey the government **unless** the government commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands. I didn't make that phrase up, I've heard that from multiple people.

So we obey speed limits because they don't hinder us from obedience or cause us to sin. We obey health codes and building codes because they - for the most part - don't cause us to sin or keep us from obedience. We file taxes, get permits for bonfires, have quiet hours after 10pm all because the government mandates it and they neither case us to sin or keep us from obedience.

But if the government passes a law that forces us to sin, we are to disobey the government. Recently, the government required that businesses provide abortifacient contraceptives under the ACA. These are contraceptives that have the ability to terminate life within the womb. Christians must refuse to do this. We cannot use or participate in the use of medicine that kills babies. There was a lawsuit that went all the way to the Supreme Court, has bounced around the courts and is now back at the Supreme Court.

It doesn't matter what the court decides. For Christians, it is not possible for us to take part in murder.

Christian adoption agencies are also under fire because they have been mandated to allow gay couples to adopt through their agencies. We cannot be part of that.

The state of Colorado continues to harass Jack Phillips to make cakes for gay couples. As a Christian, he is right to refuse to do that. Come whatever may.

If the government commands what God forbids, we must disobey. And if the government forbids what God commands, we must disobey. **And** we must be humbly willing to face the consequences which may be severe.

It's been said the sometimes the powers that be are just a group of thugs and tyrants parading around like a government. There are times when the government is not legitimate.

Side: When we determine it's right to disobey, we need to ensure we're not grandstanding our disobedience. We don't want to wave our disobedience in the faces of others.

There are times when civil disobedience needs to be known, it needs to be public. Other times it will be public whether we want it or not. But because we are called to live a peaceful and godly life our **goal** in disobedience is simply obedience to God. Our goal is not to focus attention on ourselves, but on God who is our highest authority.

Nonetheless, if we must disobey, we do so in gentleness and reasonableness. But we must stand.

Those are the general principles: obey the government **unless** the government commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands and we don't grandstand. Let's move closer to our situation.

3 - What are the factors in our current situation?

The current situation is difficult because the state is mandating restriction against things the Bible commands. The Bible says we are to work and the Bible says we are to gather together every Lord's Day in fellowship.

But here's the rub. Initially, people were willing to stay at home from work and church and follow social distancing guidelines because we did not have a lot of information about this virus. But the potential threat seemed huge. And to be fair, all sides of politics have said this virus is nothing and then changed their mind and said this is devastating. Back and forth.

As elders we were fine closing the doors of the church for a season to give deference to our governing officials. And most people were willing to stay at home from jobs for a seasons for the same reason. I think that is right and reasonable. And the restriction was not specifically pointed at churches, so I don't think we could legitimately claim it was persecution. Here are 7 factors we have to juggle in this situation:

1 - The initial reason for the stay at home order was to "flatten the curve": to keep hospitals from becoming overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases. We've done that. Hospitals are not overwhelmed and are laying people off because of lack of use.

But now we're being told that the virus has to be defeated entirely. That it is not acceptable for anyone to get this virus. There's quite a bit of talk about not returning to normal life until the entire population is vaccinated. A vaccine could be years away, even with fast-track testing. That vaccine may or may not even be effective as the virus mutates and may be dangerous without proper testing protocol. And, as a side note, the vaccines they are working on are using tissue from aborted babies. So even if we get this vaccine made, I'm not going to use it because it's manufactured with baby parts.

2 - Another factor is that the more data we have about the virus, the more we're led to believe that it is not even nearly as severe as we first thought. Now, that's actually good news. Praise God we dodged a massive bullet.

The problem is that with more and more data coming out that suggests the virus is not deadly, the restrictions are not getting looser, but in many cases tighter. So where it was initially reasonable to stay at home from work and church for a time, now it seems like the policies are varying wildly from the data.

3- The mandates from the governor are inconsistent. Now, some inconsistency is bound to happen. Why couldn't we go fishing for weeks? Fishing is the definition of social distancing. I really don't even like fishing, so it doesn't break my heart all that much. But one thing we need to keep in mind is that government is HUGE and there are always going to be inconsistencies in laws and especially so when they're given in rapid fashion like they were with the orders relating to COVID 19. As believers we want to give a lot of grace to our authorities in those matters and assume they are trying their best even when things seem inconsistent and foolish.

The problem now is that we're seeing lingering inconsistencies. And the inconsistencies are no longer unintentional but very intentional. Hundreds of people can gather together in Costco and Walmart and grocery stores and wine and beer outlets and even go buy their marijuana or go play at the park. That's considered safe and essential.

But apparently we're not capable of meeting right now as a church abiding by the same guidelines or even going to work to make an income. That inconsistency is a problem. As Americans, we're not given the constitutional right to recreate. We are given the constitutional right to exercise our religion freely. And the governor has doubled down on the severity of some of these restrictions.

4 - Biblically speaking, we should quarantine the sick and vulnerable, not the healthy. Remember the last time you were reading through Leviticus 13-15 and you were wondering why there were 149 verses on quarantining lepers and sick people? No one's wondering why that's in there any more!

The biblical model - and the model society has used for most of history - is that we isolate the sick and vulnerable, not the healthy. Most of those who have been severely affected by the virus or died have been elderly or compromised immune systems. Those are the ones we should isolate.

Initially, because a person could have the virus for 2 weeks and not know it and pass it to others we thought everyone should isolate. But, again, the data shows that those who are most affected are those who are older and compromised - and it's those who should avoid contact.

5 - Indefinite tolerance: once we realize this crisis is not a crisis and things are not going to change how long do we wait to disobey? This is the classic frog-in-a-pot-of-water scenario. We were told 14 days to flatten the curve. Then 2 more weeks. Then 4 more weeks. And now we're looking at 9 more weeks in a best case

scenario. The timeline is now essentially indefinite. "No, it's just 9 weeks." They said it was 2 weeks 6 weeks ago.

I think every Christian would agree that an indefinite lockdown would be intolerable for us to abide by. But we need to consider how long is too long. Is 3 months too long? Is 6? Is 2 years? This has now become essentially indefinite.

I think it's okay to say for a season "I don't know how long is okay, but I'm not ready to draw the line yet." But as Christians we need to be able to draw the line. At some point our respectful deference to governing authorities gives way to our deference to God and his commands. And we have to be willing to stick by our decision.

6 - Another complication and I think it's big. What happens when the governing authorities don't agree with each other? What Caesar do we obey? The president? The governor? The county sheriff? The mayor? The one we want to obey because it fits our view?

With COVID-19 we have a situation where more and more sheriffs - including our sheriff in Spokane county - are saying that the orders given by the governor are unconstitutional. State representatives are bringing lawsuits all over the country against governors. The presidential administration is also saying these tight orders are unconstitutional. So now there's disharmony between the authorities.

Some Christians I know say we should always follow the most restrictive voice. That's the safest. If that's the case, we will be compelled to do things that will compromise our faithfulness to God rather quickly. No one would work and no one would gather. If that were the case we might not meet again as a church until September. And then when the second wave hits in October we'd have to shut down again. For how long?

This is critical: Just because one authority says we have to do something does not mean we have to do it. God has given us wisdom and grace to judge these matters.

This gets into what is called the lesser magistrate doctrine. A lesser magistrate is like middle manager in government. They're the governing authority between the citizens and the highest authority. And there may be several of them. This doctrine was developed most robustly around the time of the reformation in the Magdeburg Confession when kings were outlawing the preaching of the gospel but local authorities would provide cover for protestant pastors. Martin Luther had Fredrick III, elector of Saxony, who often provided him cover against the emperor who wanted Luther dead.

So the king says no preaching of the gospel or you get locked up. The local prince says preach away. Who do we obey? The local guy. He'll take all the heat. According to the Reformers, lesser magistrates - the middle management of government - were a common grace of God to protect against tyranny. So that's one aspect.

The lower, local authority may disagree with a bad law and we free to operate under their protection.

The other aspect was that individual authorities may sin against their people and when they do, it may be right to remove them from office even though they are higher up than we are. So we know this to some extent as impeachment. Even though the president is the highest chief executive of the land, other lower officers - Representatives - may impeach him if necessary. Or in the military a court martial might convict a general even though some of the participants are of lower rank. The idea is that the person has violated their office to such an extent that their authority has been nullified and lesser authorities have taken action.

So right now there is a mishmash of authorities who disagree on these restrictions. And although some of it is partisan, not all of it is. We have the freedom to operate freely if a lesser magistrate gives us cover. That's God's grace to us.

7 - complicating factor: What if fellow Christians disagree with each other on when we should disobey the government? Maybe our fellow believers are impacted differently than we are and may come to different conclusions than we do. Families where folks who are more vulnerable to disease may see wisdom in additional government intervention for everyone. And maybe they are glad that the social distancing guidelines

are more strict because it keeps them safe. There's no one Christian position on this particular issue so we need to have a lot of grace with everyone.

Just personally, I don't assume anyone agrees with my position until they tell me they do. And I'm very careful about how forcefully I give my opinions because I don't condemn my brothers and sisters if they take a different approach. But I do feel compelled to encourage them to think through all the issues, and I want to be open to correction as well.

So let's put all this together. We've complied with the initial request, but now that's changed. And the longer this goes on, the more the science is telling us this virus - while it can be dangerous - is nowhere near as deadly as what the initial data indicated.

Further, the restrictions on work and worship are intentionally inconsistent and will cause grave harm to our society. The best course of action is to quarantine the sick and vulnerable. And while we should graciously keep in mind the medical needs of brothers and sisters in Christ - even giving up many of our liberties to ensure their safety - we can have differing solutions in good conscience.

And when we see governing authorities rising up to resist because even they recognize overreach we need to begin seriously considering how we might respectfully disregard unjust laws that our local officials will protect us against.

4 - When do we disobey when things are not black and white?

1 - When there is a clear and compelling case that the authority is willfully belligerent. A judge in Texas sentenced a hairstylist to jail because she opened her salon to make some money to feed her kids. The judge was wrong. We all know that. It was just as wrong when the law was passed as when the judge sentenced her to jail. The order was never right or lawful even though she tried to comply with it for a time.

2 - When our conscience is clear. As Christians, the testimony of our conscience is massively important (**2 Cor. 1:12**).

Jas. 4:17: So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Romans 14:23: For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

I have no problem going to other peoples' homes, letting my kids play with other kids, meeting people for coffee - as long as everyone else agrees and understands the risks. I can stand before the Lord in good conscience knowing what I am doing - though against the orders of an authority - is in line with the Word of God.

3 - What would we do if there were no law? Since the authorities are in massive disagreement with each other, we have to ask what would we do if it were up to us? If we were Rip Van Winkle - we went to sleep 6 months ago and woke up today not knowing what the legal restrictions were but we researched and found out what the medical dangers were - what would we do in good conscience? And then we do that to the glory of God.

I know this does not answer every question, but hopefully it gives a framework for how to think through these questions. And hopefully we all realize it's complicated enough that we need to have grace with one another. May God give us wisdom in this season.

Pray