

Civil Obedience (1 Peter 12:13-17)

Thoreau, back in 1849, published an essay entitled “Civil Disobedience”. Thoreau wasn’t a fan of government. In fact, he wasn’t a fan of government at all. He was jailed at one point for failure to pay his taxes. He wrote the essay to assert that citizens have a duty to resist the evils of government. So the title of this morning’s sermon is sort of a lame play on those words. In our fallen state, we have a tendency to chafe under any authority. But the Bible calls us not to civil disobedience, but to civil obedience.

Now, over the past 170 or so years, a lot of folks have been influenced by Thoreau’s politics. He didn’t like what he considered government overreach and today, it is really popular to rail against government overreach. I certainly am not fan of government overreach, especially when I have to write a check to the IRS. I believe government should only provide those services that are absolutely essential. But the problem is, your definition of essential government services is very likely different from my definition of essential government services. To put it another way, my definition of government waste is pretty much anything that doesn’t benefit me directly. Non-essential services are those things that help you but do nothing for me.

Besides, I don’t want government telling me what to do. I’ll bet you don’t either. But then, if I’m honest with myself, I have to say I don’t want anyone or anything telling me what to do. I want to be the boss of me. I want to call my own shots. I want to be in charge of my own life. I want to be a free agent.

Then I read the Bible, and I find this really inconvenient assertion: there is no such thing as a human free agent.

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:16-18)

So you are either a slave of sin, or you are a slave of righteousness. You are either Satan’s slave, or you are a bondservant of Jesus Christ. There is no third choice.

I want to be obedient to Jesus Christ. I am convinced that the best existence I can possibly enjoy is as a bondservant of Jesus. I believe Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins. I confess Him as Lord; I believe God raised Him from the dead. Since He is my Lord, it is my responsibility to do what He wants me to do and Jesus has called me to civil obedience.

Let’s look at our text for this morning.

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter 2:13-17)

This passage starts with the word “therefore”, so we’d better remember what therefore is there for. As we discussed last week, Peter has exhorted us to live our lives in a way that brings honor to our Lord and King.

Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.
(1 Peter 2:11-12)

So we are to see ourselves as alien to the culture in which we live. We are citizens of God's kingdom, not the world. We are strangers here. This world is not our home; we're just passing through, but we're still here and while we are here, we need to conduct ourselves properly so we reflect well on Christ.

It is true that as a Christian, you answer to a higher authority than any that can be found on this earth. As a Christian, you live on a different level, on a higher plane. But too many Christians act as if they have no responsibility to respect civil authorities. In fact, many have defied civil law. Many have refused to respect individuals who have been placed in authority over us. I've even had Christians tell me that they don't have to pay taxes because they are not citizens of this world. (Of course, they have no trouble using the highways other people's taxes pay for.)

This passage is really not that hard to understand. It's just hard for us to accept. Honor the king? Honor those civil magistrates who have been placed in authority over us?

"Wait just a second," you might say. "My political leaders are godless unbelievers. They openly defy God's precepts. There is no fear of God in their eyes."

Okay. But this command is not conditional and scripture is very consistent on this.

... submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him ... (1 Peter 2:13-14)

Please understand, I'm not saying we shouldn't speak out against injustice. We need to stand for God's truth but there is a right way and a wrong way to engage our culture and I submit that many Christians are forgetting what the Bible says about this.

Remember, Peter wrote this letter sometime around 64 AD. Nero was the Roman emperor at the time. He was an absolute maniac and he was no friend of Christians. In fact, this letter was written to prepare Christians for increasing persecution under Nero. Many would be imprisoned. Many would be tortured. Many would be martyred. Yet here Peter exhorts them to submit to the king's authority, Nero's authority.

You might not like your president, your governor, your senator, your congressman but none of them has stooped to the depravity of the Roman emperors of Peter's day. Praise God for the freedoms we Christians enjoy in this country. There is no guarantee that they will continue forever.

Submit to every human ordinance, says Peter. Submit to the king. Submit to governors. Submit to those government officials who are sent by them. And listen, Peter is not the only one to write this; Paul said exactly the same thing:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. (Romans 13:1)

And just to make sure we understand how serious this is, Paul adds the next verse:

Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. (Romans 13:2)

And to Titus, Paul writes:

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. (Titus 3:1-2)

How can you reconcile any of this with the Facebook rants of so many professing Christians today? Folks, we have no business slandering anyone!

Peter tells us exactly why we are to submit in verse 13. It is *for the Lord's sake*. We learn in Romans that there is no authority except from God and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

You mean God appointed someone like Hitler? Really? Well, that's a hard teaching, but it is what scripture tells us. I will not presume to explain why God allows some leaders into power. I'm pretty sure He sometimes appoints a particular king, or president as a judgment against a rebellions people. I'm convinced He sometimes lets godless, evil civil magistrates stay in power so Christians can be persecuted. The Church is never weakened by persecution. The Church thrives in the face of persecution.

But no matter what, I know He is working all things together according to the council of His own will, and His will is perfect. The promise of scripture is that all things work together for good for those who love God and are the called according to His purpose.

All things.

No exceptions.

So the question is, do you trust God? If you refuse to submit to the one whom God has placed in authority, what you are saying is that you refuse to trust God.

But what if the civil authority takes away our right to assemble as Christians?

Do you trust God?

What if we get thrown into prison?

Do you trust God?

What if I get tortured?

Do you trust God?

What if they kill me?

Well, throw me into that briar patch! To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, which is far better! Do you trust God?

Submit to authority for the Lord's sake. It is part of your Christian duty. Pay your taxes. Obey the law. Give honor to whom honor is due.

When you, as a Christian, live an exemplary life, you bring honor to Christ and that is what it is all about. When you react in a way that is different than what is expected, some will ask why, and then you can tell them why.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—(1 Peter 2:15)

This is explicit. You don't have to guess about God's will. God wants you to do good so you can silence ignorance.

I read somewhere this week, and I wish I could remember where, that nobody comes to Christ by losing an argument with a Christian. Or to put it another way, you cannot argue somebody to Christ. You can reason with somebody. You can tell them what God has done for you. You can take them down the Romans Road and explain the Gospel to them and you should, because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. But unless one is born again, he will not even see the kingdom of God. So don't get frustrated when somebody rejects the Gospel. Don't get upset when somebody responds to the Gospel with unreasonable anger. They are not rejecting you; they are rejecting Jesus. So if they yell at you, respond quietly, respond gently. Don't match shrill for shrill.

I mentioned earlier that we are slaves to the one we obey so we are either slaves to sin, or we are slaves of righteousness. But the ironic thing is, if we become slaves of righteousness, we will find true freedom in Christ.

Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:36)

But there is a right way and a wrong way to enjoy that freedom. We are to be ...;

... free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. (1 Peter 2:16)

We are to recognize that we have been set free from the penalty of sin. In Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin, but we are to use our freedom to serve God and to serve others. It seems a bit contradictory, but we are free to be slaves of Christ. We are not to use our freedom as a cover-up for our sin. Freedom in Christ is not a license to sin. We have the Holy Spirit residing within us. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He will help you conquer your sinful lusts. Cooperate with Him. Use your freedom to demonstrate your love for God and your love for others.

In verse 17, Peter sums up this teaching.

Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter 2:17)

It's a perfect summary of citizenship theology if you are a Christian. Here are four areas of application for us.

Honor all people.

Honor everybody? That's what it says. All people are made in the image of God. That image was defaced by the fall and we're all subject to depravity but we are to give everybody honor and respect, no matter what race, no matter what color, no matter what their social status, no matter what their political affiliation. This doesn't mean you have to agree with everything they do. This doesn't mean you stay silent in the face of injustice. This doesn't mean we avoid sharing the gospel because we might offend them. But we are to treat everybody with honor and respect, even when they refuse to do the same for you.

The second point is that we are to love the brethren. *Agapeo* your brothers and sisters in Christ. That's the verb. It means you give your fellow Christians what they need whether or not they deserve it. This is a volitional choice, not a feeling. You can *agapeo* somebody even if you don't feel too good about them at the moment.

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

Can unbelievers see the bond of love you have for other Christians? I've had visitors tell me that they can see the love this congregation has for one another. That's one of the best things a pastor can hear. Let's continue to nurture agape love among the brethren.

Thirdly, we need to fear God. This isn't the craven fear of the demons who know their fate is eternity in the Lake of Fire. This is about trusting God in everything. Even though I don't understand, Lord, I know you are going to work it out perfectly. I'm going to do my best to be obedient because I trust you.

Honor the king. Gee, Peter, didn't you say that back in verse 13? Well, we need to hear it over and over again because it's hard for us. We need to submit to civil authority because God ordained civil authority. Are there limits to this submission? Sure there are, but you'll have to come back tonight so we can get into what the Bible tells us about those limits. In the meantime, ease up on those political rants, won't you?

Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter 2:17)