

Limited Government Obedience; or, Civil Disobedience

Romans 13:1-7

The Declaration of Independence begins with these great lines:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them...

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness... That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government...

...When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

Did you catch that? It is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government!

We come to our last message in Romans 13:1-7 with the limits of civil government, or, to flipside, the right to resist illegitimate authority.

We saw the nature of civil government, and the proper obedience to this ordinance of God. And last time we drew the sword, or the power of civil government that is of, under, in and before God.

If God-ordained government and authority is for good and to avenge evil – then government must be good and right and opposed to evil.

Putting such power in the hands monstrous men for evil has been seen as never before in the last century. What stains not just a century but millennia, the names of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao!

So sadly, and grievously, their ideology continues to fill the minds our world and our nation today; especially among the young.

This and other texts in the Bible say Christians are to be obedient to the powers that be. We love peace and quiet, and pray for these things. We love order against anarchy. Above all, we love God through Christ who has told us to obey Him for conscience' sake as we obey rulers who are under Christ.

But there have been those who have abused this passage and said that there is no recourse except for prayer against tyrants. When a Christian finds herself and her country under the boot of a dictator – she may pray. She may work within the system. But she may not and must not resist those powers, because the powers are of God.

Verse 1 says everyone be subject because their authority is of God, established by Him.

Verse 2 says clearly resistance to such authority is resistance to God and brings condemnation.

Verse 4 twice calls them ministers of God.

Verse 5 says it is a matter of conscience that demands obedience, not disobedience.

And then the cherry on the cake is Paul says these things in the reign of Nero. Submit to wicked Nero!

This is how the argument goes. Are they right?

No. Absolutely not!

For starters, Nero as the monster had not yet emerged at the time of writing of Romans. He went mad in his second half of his reign when he began to butcher Christians.

But the full answer is this: Paul uses absolute language because he is speaking principles which have a limited application.

Let us take a parallel account. Paul writes absolutely: “Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord.” Sounds absolute, right? So a husband can command his wife to jump off of the Empire State Building, and she has to obey, right? It’s right in the Bible.

No! Of course not. There are all kinds of limits on husbands to wives, parents to children, teachers to students, elders to churches, employers to employees, and yes, governors to the governed.

Jesus commanded his disciples in Matthew 23. Whatever the scribes and Pharisees tell you to observe, that observe and do. Why do they then disobey in Acts?

So it is here. Render to your husbands and your parents and your church the things that are theirs, and no other. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars, and above all, the things that are God’s.

So this text is as much against tyranny in government as it is against anarchy in the subjects.

“...In explaining to the inhabitants of Rome their duty as citizens, the apostle has shown the finest address. For while he seemed only to plead the cause of the magistrate with the people, he *tacitly conveyed* the most wholesome instruction to the heathen rulers, who he knew were too proud to receive advice from teachers of his character and nation. For telling the rulers that they are the servants of God for good to the people, he taught them the purpose of their office, and showed them that their sole aim in executing it ought to be, to

promote the happiness of their people; and that as soon as they lose sight of this, their government degenerates into tyranny.” Macknight

The responsibilities of leadership are here as well as that of submission to them. And both flow from above – from God.

When civil government oversteps its bounds – becomes Big Brother, becomes a wealth-redistributor via welfare, becomes your pastor, your employer, you doctor, and so on; then they no longer function as God’s minister. As such, they no longer have authority from God. They are guilty before the Lord. And, here is the point – their commands are no longer authoritative, no longer binding, no longer to be obeyed.

Here’s the quote of the day: “Unrighteous Laws Are No Laws at All.”

Was that Thomas Jefferson or the fiery John Knox who said that? Nope! It was Augustine in the 5th century! “Unrighteous Laws Are No Laws at All.”

Our first point is that as government is limited, obedience is limited.

As all authority God has ordained has a proper limit under God, so his sphere of rule is no different.

Recognize the connection between limited authority and limited obedience. To say we owe unlimited obedience to the government means the government then has unlimited power and authority – which it doesn’t, which it can not!

We have come through such monstrous ideas in civil governments haven’t we?

Pharaoh in Egypt; dictators – gods on earth – in Babylon, Persia, Greece and in the Caesars. And even when the Christians were given rights, how long it took to get away from the idea that the religion of the king must be the religion of the land!

This began to change during the reformation and the advent of Protestantism. The Reformation rediscovered the sovereignty of God over the sovereignty of man or the sovereignty of the church. Freedom was rediscovered.

And that put a limit on all mankind, in particular the pope and the prince.

When governments start to go crazy and butcher their people, butcher the believers, it is high time to restrain them, like a crazy father who tries to kill his children.

We want government, we want good rule; and resisting evil rule is not the same thing as anarchy. Communism and socialism continue to believe in utopias; as though human nature doesn't really need restraint. Just educate, they say; or throw more money at the problem; redistribute the wealth; blame some group for the failure of the utopia.

Then God-given freedoms and rights of people are shrunk while the powers of centralized government balloon and bloat out of proportion.

This is where constitutions and laws are vital – to describe and lock in these limits which are more on the government than on the governed.

Sinful man is limited by God; government is given by God to help in that limitation, so we don't destroy one another. Government is made of sinful people; government is limited by God to help in its important calling.

As Harry Callahan said – “A Man's Got to Know His Limitations”

Then here is our **second point** – the right to rule is with the consent of the governed.

The consciences and lives of men are free. They have rights from God. Inalienable, says the Declaration, reflecting a Christian view of man.

All are bound to God first and not to man – both fallen and redeemed.

God gives rights; government either respects those rights, protects and encourages them; or steps on them and takes them away from you.

Here is a second motto: “Government never bestows a single right”.

If they do, they have the right to take the right away.

It is the opposite – you bestow upon Government the right to rule. God’s authority does not run from the government to you, unless it first runs from you to the government!

The consent of the governed is to have a central place – why? Because as Lord Acton said: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Government is by the consent of a free people. Government is limited. Government is to be obeyed in its lawful exercise. And government must be resisted by a variety of means when it acts otherwise.

This realization came about never so powerfully as in the history of the English people.

And this is where Americans received this outlook.

Moses Mather wrote at the time of the War for Independence and looked back all the way to the Magna Charta in 1215 as to how his English forbears solemnly protected the rights of man. He said, “By nature every man under God is his own legislator, judge and avenger; an absolute Lord of his property.”

This becomes then as well a question of loyalty to Christ. Many Christians make the mistake of splitting loyalty between God and country. Christian flags and American flags decorate the Lord’s sanctuary.

Is Christ on the same level as Congress? Is his throne not above and beyond the so-called *Supreme Court*?

As freed people under God, we obey civil authorities when they rule aright. As freed people under God, we disobey civil authorities when they rule wickedly – giving what is not theirs to give, and taking what is not theirs to take away.

Junius Brutus, in his “Defense against Tyrants” writes:

“Justice requires that tyrants and destroyers of the commonwealth be compelled to reason. Charity challenges the right of relieving and restoring the

oppressed. Those who make no account of these things, do drive piety, justice and charity out of this world, that they may never more be heard of.”

This reflects the Bible – “Can a corrupt throne be allied with you-- a throne that brings on misery by its decrees? (Psa 94:20 NIV)

WE have a great heritage in this nation – but that is on the line today, with the erosion of law and Christian thinking in our country. The rights of the unborn, the protection and promoting of perversions, the heavy taxation to support social programs of suspicious worth, the rights of parents and the forced support of ungodly education – these are sinking this nation. And what more could I say of giving rights to trees and snails over human beings and progress?

“We have fled from the political Sodom – let us not look back lest we perish and become a monument of infamy and derision to the world.” Samuel Adams

We are become the political Sodom.

Our families are falling apart, divorce rate soars as marriage is degraded in the worst possible way, violent crimes and murder are reported with barely a notice, suicide rates soar, drug abuse is legalized and promoted; prisons overflow if criminals are sent there at all.

This doesn't just happen, folks. It doesn't come out of the blue, by chance. This is not “It is what it is,” like we don't know how we got here. “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rules, the peoples groan.” Proverbs 29:2

This brings us to our **last point** – the resistance and disobedience to wicked government.

We have already cited the means we are to be using to *promote* good government – prayer, voting, participation, enlisting others to make a stand, addressing your representatives faithfully and humbly, and running for office yourself.

When is resistance demanded though? This is no easy question. There is no formula for it.

Hodge warns us: “wicked rulers may still be tolerated and obeyed – now however out of right, but because the remedy may be worse than the disease... we have no right to remedy one evil by the production of a greater evil.”

France is the great example of this – they dethroned a tyrant king, taking off his head, and proceeded to decapitate one another!

Another question is ‘who is to resist?’ If government is of the people and for the people, then there will be a general consensus that enough is enough. That certainly was the case in the 1770’s.

The wise answer given by Calvin has been rightly and warmly received – it is the role of the *lesser magistrates* to resist the higher tyrants.

This is how our nation was formed – the states had considerable control over and against the federal government.

But that has changed dramatically, to say the least.

Ultimately it is time to resist tyranny when it is your duty to do so; when it is sinful to do otherwise.

Three important instructions:

1. Seek all redress before making such a move – do not act in a rash or hasty matter.
2. Be prepared to pay the price, the consequences for obedient rebellion against tyranny.
3. Flight from such oppression is an option.

This all should be a matter of deep faith and trust in the Lord, who must act or all is lost. “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who try at all.”

The Lord tears down and builds up nations. He can make us know when it is a time to break down and a time to build up; a time of war and a time of peace.