

## Civil Disobedience

series: *God & Governance*

July 24, 2016

Acts 5:17-32; Romans 13:107

Randy Lovelace

It's my turn to preach on civil disobedience. As we continue in this series—if you're visiting with us—we are spending the summer looking at *God & Governance*. How are we to understand and live as Christians within the kingdoms of man, as those who belong first and foremost to the Kingdom of God. This morning we look at the nature of civil disobedience. Let me say by way of introduction that indeed this church, as are all Protestant churches—they are the by-product, they are the children, of civil disobedience. Maybe you weren't aware. Let me give you this reminder.

It is an apocryphal story that Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door at Wittenberg, on the church door, but it is true that he sent his document on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, to Archbishop Albert of Mainz, who then passed it along to Pope Leo X in Rome, and he was then summarily brought to court, to the ecclesiastical court. He was excommunicated in 1521 and was then ordered to appear before the Diet of Worms. He was then charged with teaching heresy. Let me just give you the opening paragraph to this document which is often not known or not read, and when we think about what it was he was saying first. His very first point. Here's what he said.

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter. In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

His first propositions:

(1) Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said repent, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance. (2) This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, which is administered by priests. (3) Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work diverse mortifications of the flesh.

This is how the Reformation began. It began with a pen in hand in a letter with theological propositions. Yes, there would be much violence that would follow, but it did not begin with a desire to be involved in [any] violence whatsoever. But it's important to note that during his trial at the Diet of Worms he was encouraged—in fact they sought to compel him to recant his views. To which Luther stated, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me.” And so the Protestant church would begin its protests, of which this church, being part of the reformed tradition, is a child of that movement.

But as we understand our role as Christians—if you are a Christian—this morning let me reassert what I've said many times: That first and foremost any Christian, wherever they are, are first and foremost members of the Kingdom of God, and only secondarily citizens of whatever nation they find themselves in. So therefore with that understanding, then how do we go about living our life of faith—if you are a Christian—living in a nation or in a place where in fact it becomes illegal to practice your faith. How do we respond? How do we deal with these difficult kinds of questions? The good news is I won't be able to unpack all of it here. But I want to encourage you to show up to our Q&A after the service. I'm going to be doing a brief Q&A this afternoon in our community room where maybe we can discuss some of the questions. But the question before us this morning is: Is civil disobedience ever biblical, and if so, how do we understand it. Let's look at it together. First we're going to look at the **Mandate**. Secondly, **Restraint**. Thirdly, the **Method**. **Mandate, Restraint, and Method**.

First the **Mandate**. With that we're going to look at Romans 13:1-7 again.

<sup>1</sup> Let 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.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> for 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. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay 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.

Let's look and do a brief statement of review of the mandate that is always before every Christian in every age and in every place. The mandate is twofold. You can't have one without the other. And the mandate is submission and honor. What he states there is that the general attitude and, as well, the approach of every Christian—and let's [say] specifically to those of us who live in the United States—we are called to be in submission to those who have been put in authority over us, from local all the way to national. And submission is to then be characterized by an inward attitude and approach of honor and respect. Now interestingly, oftentimes we see the right to protest, and that we are allowed to do. We are allowed to protest. We are allowed to speak our minds. We are allowed to speak the truth even when that truth is in contradiction to the opinions or even to the policies of those who hold authority. That is still exercising submission. So we can take all the rights and privileges that are afforded to us as American citizens, and first and foremost as Christians, to speak the truth and to speak our hearts and our convictions, but to do so through the lawful means which have been given to us by the authorities that are set over us. Indeed, we are to show them proper submission. As he says, we are showing them submission as unto the Lord because he states to us [that] those who are in authority over us have not arrived in their place of authority catching God unawares. They're not there in contradiction to God's will and God's providence. Now I recognize that opens up a

whole can of questions. But [at] the end of the day the net effect is still the same. Paul teaches here clearly, particularly in a time when there was governmental oppression and dictatorship in the Roman kingdom, in the Roman empire, that he was calling all Christians in his day to show proper submission—indeed, even while Paul was in jail.

But the second part, the part that we've looked at over the last number of weeks, is oh, so difficult—to be able to show outward submission and obedience, [often] because, quite frankly, we don't want to get in trouble or end up in jail. It's showing honor and respect. Particularly because the right to the freedom of speech, as we've become accustomed to and aware of and practicing, it also is a double-edged sword. It's a blessing that we are able to speak our hearts and our minds freely and still show proper submission. But it also cuts the other way: that when those rights are afforded to sinners, we know what happens when we don't get what we want. We get angry. Consider for just a moment some of the bumper stickers you've seen over the last number of months. Or perhaps you've received e-mails and phone calls that are robo-calls about those we should elect and the kinds of threats we're told one side or the other is going to hold over us. And what can happen very, very slowly, but most certainly surely, is that the more and more that we are steeped within this context and in our culture—a culture of dishonor and disrespect as sport—it's very easy to show outwards submission but inwardly not respect at all.

Paul calls us again to the mandate for every Christian in every place to show proper submission and honor, as we've looked at. To pray for those who we consider enemies, pray for those that you disagree with. Now that, I think, is a difficult mandate. But it is a mandate that is given to us by Paul because it came directly from the Lord Jesus—Jesus, who on the cross prayed for those who persecuted him, when he said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Now someone who is perceptive may have the objection, *Well of course, that was Jesus. He knew what was going to happen. We don't.* Except there is one small caveat: that Jesus says those who would follow me must take up the cross as well, as we've heard read this morning. Those who would save their lives will lose it. Those who will lose their lives will save it. That means that Jesus isn't just our Savior. He is also the path in which we walk. His attitude ought to be our attitude and begin shaping our heart motives and heart attitudes. And that is even when we're being berated, even when we're being accused, even when we're being maligned or made fun of or belittled or disrespected. What does it look like for the Christian to pray for those who they disagree with? How would our interaction as the Body of Christ change with the world around us if that was the first place we went. But it is the first place we ought to go.

And I sympathize with you, and I empathize with many who are probably sitting there saying, *Yes, but. . .* and raising all kinds of objections in your minds and hearts. Yes, I know. But I will tell you, there is nothing greater for the soul of a Christian than to have an enemy. Because when you have an enemy, it begins to press you up against the wall. It begins to expose rival idolatries. Idolatry of selfishness because you didn't get your way. Rivals of only wanting to create environments where everybody agrees with you and everybody likes you. It presses in on us and forces us to ask the question: Do I really trust in Jesus? Is my identity so cemented in who he is, in His grace, in his character, in his love, [that] therefore I am not persuaded by those who are my enemies that somehow I am of no value. That is a strong and difficult place to be, but a place that is healthy for the soul of the Christian and keeps us from relying on things that are so easy to rely on—the things of our hands, the things of our talents—but rather on the one

in whom we place our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ. So the mandate of having submission and honor is there.

The question is this: What about **Restraint**. Is there any restraint in this? Where are the borders? It's a proper question. Are there restraints to the government at which point a Christian says, *I cannot cross this line, and I will object*. I believe it is clear for us as we find it given to us in Acts 5. In Acts 5 we see something very interesting there. We see that Peter and the early church and the disciples were busy about teaching and preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The powers that be was not just the Roman government but was also the Judaic rule, the Jewish rulers who were charged with having responsibility and care and governance over their own people. And so [Peter and the apostles] were preaching the gospel, and that ran into a buzz saw, a buzz saw of conflict of critique and of danger. Verse 25 of Acts 5. (Do we have that? Go to 25.) It says this:

<sup>25</sup> And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." <sup>26</sup> Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

Do you remember the context—we looked at this last year—and that was they were performing miracles and preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and people began to follow them in droves, and now they were being contradicted by the Judaic governing authorities. [The Romans were concerned that if [they] brought them in by force, they would be stoned by the people of the Jewish nation. Verse 27 continues the story:

<sup>27</sup> And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> 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." <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men." <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

And there lies the restraint. The restraint for Peter is the restraint for the Christian. Let's look at it in terms of specific words. First, what is the Christian response when a government simply permits behavior that is counter to God's righteousness and his Word. In other words, when the government puts into codified law, (that's probably redundant), when it codifies rules and regulations that allows and permits behavior that contradicts God's moral standards. The important thing is that behavior that is in direct disobedience to God's righteous moral character, while not a good thing, is not sufficient grounds for disobedience or disrespect to the governing authorities, because the government is simply permitting it. And so the Christian governed by God's word, empowered by the Spirit, recognizes that we ought not to fall into those practices, recognizing that our not falling into those practices that are legal and permitted may cause us public shame and disregard. This happened to the early church, and it happens to you, it can happen to me, and it can happen to us publicly and corporately. So we must draw a

distinction. What is being talked about here with Peter is not what they were permitting. The key point of restraint is this: It's when the Christian is being compelled, forced, or prohibited.

So let's look at the first. Here they were being prohibited from preaching in the name of Christ and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. So they were being prohibited, restrained from these practices. Peter says: We refuse to obey that prohibition, because to do so would bring us in direct contradiction to God's stated word through His Son which says you are to be disciples making me known throughout the world, in Jerusalem, and the uttermost parts of the world. So clearly they have a choice of obedience. Peter says it turns on this one point: they were being prohibited, and they refused to submit. But notice their refusal to submit also came with a very clear reception of the consequences. Peter does not reject the consequences. Even Paul does not reject the consequences. He just wants to make sure that whatever consequences he has coming to him as a Roman citizen [are] brought through the Roman system of government and [its] judicial courts. They were willing to receive what was due to them, but they did not submit, because they were being prohibited.

The second point is if the Christian is being compelled. Now we see there we can simply go to the Book of Daniel wherein we see there was a leverage of power game going on within the Nebuchadnezzar government, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were being forced to bow the knee to Nebuchadnezzar as God. So here they were being compelled, but they refused. And Nebuchadnezzar says, *You understand that when you refuse to do what I am wanting to force you to do, then I will put you into the furnace of fire.* And their response simply was: *So be it. God will either rescue us from the flames, or he will be the one who will [avenge] us. He will be the one who protects us.* So notice, either being compelled to disobey God or prohibited from obeying God is the turning point for not submitting. Notice that is an incredible distinction with the issue of permitting.

So for example, though we as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ who preach the gospel and the word in its totality recognize that God has made 'man' woman and man, and therefore 'man' is brought into God's blessed purposes and provision—marriage between a man and a woman—the government of United States now permits for same sex marriages. Does that mean, therefore, that we have the right not to submit to the governing authorities? No, we do not have that right, except in the case where—at this point this is not the case—but if at any point this church is being compelled to ratify marriages between two men or two women, we will take the Biblical path of not submitting to that rule. Now that's not grandstanding. I'm simply giving that as an example of a subject that is obviously very much a part of our culture in this day. But notice right now the government *permits* it. We're not being compelled. Or if we were prohibited from practicing the preaching, the free preaching of the gospel and what it teaches regarding human sexuality in all of its forms, because what we teach [is] that sexuality is only to be expressed between a man and a woman who are married. So if we begin to go through God's word in the normal passage of time and we get to passages where it calls [for] a prohibition on those who. . . that we ought not to practice sexuality between those who aren't married, and we preach or teach against it, and the government says you're not allowed to do so, because to do so is going against what we say is free speech—what do we do? The same case. We continue to preach what God's word teaches.

But thanks be to God we are not in that place. It isn't a statement that we will ever be there, but I do not fear it. Nor should the Christian fear it. We ought to use the given rights and the given pathways that we are allowed to go about bringing about righteousness within our country and to elect, according to your conscience, officials and policies that you agree with. But thanks be to God, at this point we are allowed to freely preach the gospel. But there may come a day when we are not free to do so, and it's at this point when we are compelled or prohibited. This was a point that Martin Luther King took on very specific problems. In a letter from the Birmingham jail he said these words: "There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust. Of course there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It has been sublimely practiced in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. Indeed," he says, "we can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal, and everything that the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was illegal. It was illegal to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany, but I am sure that if I lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers, even though it was illegal. If I lived in a communist country today, where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws." He gets to the heart of being compelled or prohibited. But it is in the exercise of the Christian faith, not subjective, personal opinions. But there is restraint.

Finally, what's the **Method**, and this brings us full circle. The method of civil disobedience is bound up in the phrase. But more pointedly, we go back to where we started. The method of the Christian church, either individuals who are Christians or corporately, that when we believe we are being compelled or prohibited from practicing the Christian faith, then we are in our disobedience to still practice submission, that is, submission to the consequences that come with disobeying the governing authorities. It is not to pick up the sword or the gun or the fist to fight back, but it is to submit to the consequences. And finally, honoring the humanity of those who are in power over us by not choosing violent means to resist. So even in the practice of when we are being compelled or prohibited from practicing the Christian faith, we come right back to where Paul started in Romans 13. We are still called to submission, even willing to take the consequences, trusting [that] our identity and faith in Jesus Christ will be the one that is the rock of our salvation, but also honoring the humanity of those who would even enforce things that are unjust and unbiblical on us.

Again, at the center of our faith was an innocent man who died on our behalf, who gave himself over to those who persecuted him, a man who was taken on a cross, nailed there—and yet he would still say, "Not my will, but your will be done." And when he said, "Into your hands I commit my spirit," [it] is an act of faith. We, when we are standing for the faith—if it were to ever come to that, because we are being compelled or forbidden from doing what God commands—then we, too, can say, "Lord, into your hands we commit ourselves. For you are

the Lord.” But as the one in whom our salvation comes, we can say in the name of Christ, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” They are sinners. We are sinners.

Civil disobedience is a thorny subject. This was not going to be the answer to all the questions, but it is an answer to some: that we need to be wise in the exercising of our faith, shrewd in living in a country where the culture is changing, laws are changing, attitudes are changing. May the Lord, through all of that change and through all the uncertainty again and again and again, press each and every Christian to the heart of their faith, their Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and [enable them to] take up their cross, empowered by the Spirit to walk that path of obedience. Even though that may mean consequences, may it be done through the gracious character and love of Christ. For we say at the heart of our faith, “While we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us.” What kind of a revolution would it be if that became the heart character of our faith. May the Lord enable us by His grace to love those not only who agree with us, to love those who are like us, but to love those who disagree with [us], love those who are in power over us—even if it comes to the point of the spear. Only by the grace of Christ can the Church of Jesus Christ do this, but may we do so in humility and wisdom.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would make us a people shaped by your word. May you increasingly transform our hearts, transform our desires and our loves, that they would be attached increasingly to the character and love of Jesus Christ. Lord, that we in the exercising of our faith in this country and in this time, may the exercising of our faith be characterized by Christ's love and His grace and not merely by personal opinions or vendettas. Lord, may we be a people shaped who are known for mercy and grace. Lord, we cannot do this unless you do this in us. And, oh Lord, if we, the Church of Jesus Christ globally or in this country or in this city—whatever the case may be—if we ever find ourselves in similar footsteps of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego or Peter or Paul or most pointedly, our Savior Jesus—may you give us the grace to respond as they did. Father, into your hands we commit ourselves. Have mercy on us. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.