

The Christian & Authority: Tricky Questions – Part III

Romans 13:1-7
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Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Ontario
“Delighting in God to the glory of God”
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The last two weeks you have had to swallow some strong medicine, with this warning label attached to the side of the bottle: “Leaves Many Unanswered Questions.” This week I want to answer the three most pressing questions that come to us when we consider the sweeping command Paul makes in Romans 13. First, let’s recall the command and some of its implications:

Command: Submit to governing authorities.
Implications: Non-submission is rebellion against God’s will since God has established every authority.
Motive for submission: The wrath of God (whip) and the conscience of man (carrot).

How has your submission been this week? I have had all kinds of people complaining to me about driving the speed limit! Why are you complaining? You should be thanking me! I am helping you to restore your conscience!

There is a certain peace that comes in submission to authority – a sense of rest in the providence and power of God. If we had more time I would go in to this, but I urge you to look for it on your own. If you willingly place yourself under authority, I dare say you are going to experience sweet times of fellowship with the Lord!

You will also face some very difficult challenges! Let’s look at three of those this morning. Here are the three big questions that haunt the mind of the person who hears that he is to submit to civil authorities.

1. What if the authority forbids me to do what God commands?
2. What if the authority commands me to do what God forbids?
3. What if the authority endorses what God condemns? That is, they don’t make me do it personally, but they promote or allow what is morally evil.

In the process we will learn from twelve grown men, four fourteen-year-olds (Daniel 1), one old man (Daniel in the lion’s den), and one unborn child. The three questions progress from easiest to hardest, so let’s begin with the first.

I. What if the authority forbids me to do what God commands?

What do you do when told by a governing authority to stop doing something God commands? For example, if God commanded all men everywhere to dye their hair green, and the government of Canada passed a law that made green hair illegal – what would you have to do as a Christian? Paul says here in Romans to submit to the governing authorities. Do we sell the green dye? How do we respond to these civil leaders?

One of the key passages to understanding this dilemma is Acts 5:

(Acts 5:12-42) “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.’ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

“Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council and all the senate of Israel and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ‘We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.’ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. And someone came and told them, ‘Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.’ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

“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.’ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.’

“When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. And he said to them, ‘Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!’ So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

Most of the time, the way you obey God is by obeying man. Here we have an example of having to *disobey* men in order to *obey* God.

God commands through an angel: “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” The High Priest (civil and religious authority) commands: “We charge you not to teach in this Name!” The Twelve answer via Peter: “We must obey God rather than men.”

So, by their example, the Apostles teach us what to do when we are forbidden by the authority to do what God commands – we listen to God, not the authority. Or, we listen to our ultimate authority, if you like. This phrase really becomes our motto as Christian citizens of various lands and regimes. We are pleased to obey our leaders in all things – even the uncomfortable things we do not like or understand – but we will not stop doing what God commands if forbidden by the state. The principle is that when God reveals one thing, and the authority commands another, we stick with God.

This may all sound nice and neat, but I want you to notice something here. These twelve had a *direct* word from God. There was nothing intuitive or “what it means to me” here. A problem comes when you move from Direct Revelation to Indirect Assumption. Too many Christians stop reading “*Thus saith the Lord*” and start saying, “*I think this is what God would want.*” No. The only way you may not obey an authority in this example is when that authority is prohibiting some action that God clearly commands.

You may be quite convinced that God wants you to place a large sign on your front lawn with a gospel message. That is fine. But if there is a bylaw prohibiting large signs you are bound by Romans 13:1 to not build it! In fact, if you build it, you dare not say, “We must obey God rather than men” because you don’t know if that is God’s will or not! There is no direct revelation – nothing in the Bible that commands you to do it. The Bible does command you to evangelize. Now if the state forbids that – tells you not to speak to anyone about Christ – well, then you have grounds (indeed a responsibility) to not obey the governing authority. God has commanded it – you must obey it!

This cannot be overstated. Our bigger problem is keeping the commands of the authority that we do not like. In Canada in 2006 there are not many Bible commands that our government forbids. We just tend to violate ones we do not like. I take you back to the last two Sundays and the need to place ourselves under the civil authorities that God has sovereignly placed in that position. Your focus must be on getting this submission principle into your bloodstream so that your first instinct is to do what you are commanded. Until we are faithful at this, we have very little right to start piously breaking the law.

Our decision to disobey should *shock* the authorities, not make them shrug with a “here we go again.” I, frankly, am very wary of those Christians who are always breaking the laws of the land and promoting their own view of things. The tone in which they do it usually betrays that something is wrong. We Christians are to be model citizens, treating our authorities with respect and honour. This is what Paul is saying in Romans 13:

(Romans 13:7) “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.”

In the disciples’ willful rebellion in order to follow God, you still see an honour and respect for the authority. This is what is so often missing in “Christian resistance.” Just because you gain God’s approval to violate Romans 13:1 does not mean you also gained his approval to violate Romans 12:9-21! We have got to have proof in the Word of God – our Direct Revelation from heaven – that the governmentally-forbidden action we want to do is actually commanded by God. If it is not there, we obey the authority.

Let’s move on to the second question....

II. What if the authority commands me to do what God forbids?

(Daniel 1: 1-16) “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

“But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, ‘I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.’ Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ‘Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.’ So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.”

Daniel and the three friends are commanded by the governing authority to eat certain food and wine. This is a problem for them. Why? They were not vegetarians! I have heard people use this reference to suggest that and really that is pretty funny. This has nothing to do with meat being bad! Secondly, it could not have been that the King's food violated the Mosaic Dietary Laws. Why? Because no where in the Old Testament is drinking wine forbidden – in fact, it is called a gift from God! The only other option is this: Babylonian Kings would have elaborate worship ceremonies before they ate, devoting their food to their pagan idols. To eat that food was to join in that worship – it is as simple as that. These four young men knew that to take the delicious food from the King would be to do what God forbids – worship an idol.

So, what are we to do when commanded by a governing authority to do something that God forbids? How do we respond if we are commanded to lie? Steal? Kill?

What Daniel does here as a 14 year-old is a great lesson to every child. He makes an appeal – two, actually. He approaches his authority and explains why he would like to do something different. He also offers a way in which the spirit of the law might be kept. Clearly, his authority is under an authority, and this man fears for his life if he violates the King's command. Daniel provides him with a way to permit his disobedience that still enables the man to honor the king. Disobedience does not permit disrespect. That is the first great lesson we see here.

The second great lesson is that God allows for us in certain cases to seek a way of honoring the spirit of the authority's law without violating the law of God. You may be commanded to steal, but you think hard and come up with a moral way to get what your authority desires. You appeal to him to do things your way. If not – you cannot do it! Perhaps he tells you to lie, but you appeal to him to tell the truth and show him how it might work better in the long run.

This kind of thing happens all the time to Christians, but we must be of the mindset that there may be a way around the situation that allows us to honour God *and* please the authority. For these young men, what was at stake was their loyalty to God. They did not compromise, but they disobeyed the king in a way that did not bring disgrace on him.

A second example comes from Daniel 3.

(Daniel 3:8-18) “Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

“Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, ‘Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?’ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘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.’”

The Command: worship this disgusting idol. What is the Revealed Truth which made these three friends stand and not bow down? God had clearly stated: “You shall have no other gods before me.” From Israel’s start it had been clear that there was to be only one God worshiped. Now that they were commanded to worship the golden image, there was no question what they needed to do. They would not submit to the evil command of the king to worship the golden statue. This might be described as a passive disobedience. Everyone bows down... except for three guys.

Once I was in a church service that was quite energetic -- and televised. I was blocking the camera – I stood out! Everyone but me knew it! These three were standing while everyone else was prostrated on the ground. They stood out. They were giving themselves up to the will of God in the matter. There was no antagonism toward Nebuchadnezzar in their disobedience. In fact, it would be better not to even call this disobedience – it was obedience to a higher authority. Their hearts were still in obedience mode.

(Daniel 3:19-25) “Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these

men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.' He answered and said, 'But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.'"

Theirs was to do right and leave the consequences to God. This is always the way it is with Christians. It may mean immense suffering and ultimate ruin. But God is to be trusted. Stuart Olyott noticed these two matters in his little commentary on Daniel. Their refusal to sin brought about two things: deliverance IN the fire, and fellowship with Christ they otherwise never would have experienced.

(Daniel 4:1-23) "It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom 120 satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; and over them three presidents, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other presidents and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. Then these men said, 'We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.'

"Then these presidents and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, "O King Darius, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked." Therefore King Darius signed the document and injunction.

"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. Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. Then they came near and said before the king, concerning the injunction, 'O king! Did you not sign an injunction, that anyone who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?' The king answered and said, 'The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.' Then they answered and said before the king, 'Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or the injunction you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day.'

"Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him. Then these men came by agreement to the king and said to the king, 'Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.' Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king declared to Daniel, 'May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!' And a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing

might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

“Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, ‘O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?’ Then Daniel said to the king, ‘O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.’ Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.”

The real den of lions for Daniel was in his heart. Should he continue to pray? To do so meant certain death. It was his custom to pray three times a day in public. If he stopped doing so, he was a hypocrite. If he continued to do so, he was an insurgent. Again, it does not look like Daniel’s soul battle lasted long. He prayed to God. He did not submit to the King’s evil command.

III. What if the authority endorses what God condemns? That is, they don’t make me do it personally, but they promote or allow what is morally evil.

Is there a call on the Christian to exercise “Civil Disobedience?” What is a Christian to do when the government is doing or promoting that which is morally evil, even when there is no direct bearing on the Christian?

There are many examples. One sin that might be soon be promoted by the government is prostitution. Gambling is endorsed today: you do not have to participate, but your government promotes it. Vancouver just won its court battle to keep drug delivery sites open to junkies. The law of the land permits two people of the same gender to marry. According to abortion statistics from StatsCan in 2002, 105,309 out of 436,126 pregnancies ended with an abortion. An abortion, kids, is when a baby is killed while it is still inside its mommy and then removed by so-called medical professionals. Twenty-four percent of all pregnancies in Canada in 2002 ended with an abortion.

The Devil likes to trick us into all kinds of diversions when we hear this: the health of the mother, the circumstances of the pregnancy, the age of the woman, etc. We can get caught arguing specifics instead of stating the obvious. Innocent babies are being killed and our government both condones and promotes it. This is wrong. It is a blight on our country. We are guilty before God. What are we Christians to do about it? We can get involved with Crisis Pregnancy Centres, we can write letters, and we can petition for change. But does there come a point where the evil is too great and we cannot sit idly by anymore? I am not for one second suggesting we kill the abortionist and blow up the abortion clinic. I am asking if there comes a point where we must disobey the authority in order to draw attention to the evil of what the authority is letting other people do or not do?

Should I jaywalk in order to stop a rape? Should I strike an attacker who is harming my wife? Should I speed to get my dying son to the hospital? There comes a time when passive acceptance of an evil perpetrated on another becomes a sin equal to that of taking personal revenge. Attack my wife and I will do whatever it takes to stop you – to the glory of God. Beat me up, and Lord willing, I will turn the other cheek. The two do not compare.

But what do we do about something as tricky as abortion? It is all so silent, so clinical, so easily forgotten. We could look back over history and see what others have done. We think here of Wilberforce fighting to abolish the slave trade. For over twenty years he fought the battle in the British Parliament –

and won! Is this what we must do with abortion? Fight it in parliament? Sign petitions? Write letters? Speak to our leaders? Certainly all these things are good to do. But the big difference between slavery and abortion is this: only one is forbidden in the Bible. The Bible forbids murder, but it does not forbid the institution of slavery. It certainly forbids the abuse of slaves, but slavery itself is never forbidden. Abortion is the act of murder. Innocent babies are killed. It is different.

Someone might suggest we look at the Americans and the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. There was peaceful, civil disobedience: sit ins, marching without permission, etc. But even here the case is slightly different. In America, positive laws that demanded equal rights for blacks existed but were not being enforced. Lesser governing authorities were not following the constitution. Abortion in Canada is different in the sense that our highest laws endorse abortion. Women are doing what is legal and approved by the governing authority when they get an abortion.

Therefore, some appeal to Biblical examples like Esther. A law was made encouraging the destruction of the Jews. There was another law that said no one went to see the King unless invited. Esther, the Jewish Queen, was not getting an invitation! So, she broke the lesser law of standing before the king, in order to draw attention to the evil law – the genocide of her people. Some would say, “Here is our example! Laws that forbid standing within a certain distance of an abortion clinic must be broken in order to draw attention to the evil – and hopefully to persuade some women not to go through with their intentions of murder.” Is this what we must do?

I don’t know. I think at some level this must be a matter of conscience. But I do know this: you cannot hope to sit idly by, remaining silent and doing nothing, while the slaughter of innocents progresses. If it must be, then let it be only the Christians who stand up for the innocent. Three hundred babies are killed in our country every day. The author of those lives is deeply offended at such sin. We must be, too.

My point in bringing up this emotionally charged example is this: there are times when we have to think very carefully about how to live as a Christian. Clearly, there are times when an authority must be disobeyed. Clearly, there are times when an authority must be challenged to cease from its ungodly ways. Yes, it is good to work with your own hands and live a quiet and peaceful life – unless your neighbour needs you. Then you must stop, get dirty, spend your money and act on your love.

By Pastor Paul W. Martin © Grace Fellowship Church

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