

Emmanuel Church
On Civil Disobedience
August 2020

Intro: From the movie, *The Right Stuff*, “You can be Gus.”

- Our present crisis...
 - We find ourselves tempted to go “hat in hand” to the civil magistrates, asking their permission to **be the church** (those gathered out of their homes and into a public place in order...)
 - To gather around Word and Sacrament
 - To worship the Father, through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit
 - In the heavenlies (Heb. 12)
 - Pleading with God “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”
 - I.e. “Take everything we do in worship on Sunday morning and spread it around our community, our state, our nation and don’t stop until the whole world is ordered according to what we ritually embody and celebrate every Sunday morning.”
 - And to do this, increasingly, we are having to wrestle with the concept/doctrine of “civil disobedience.”
 - Because of the overlap of jurisdictions (state and church)
 - Review of spheres
 - Family (health, education and welfare)
 - Church (Word and Sacrament)
 - State (secure the borders and keep the peace)
 - So, as Isaiah insisted, “To the law and the testimony!”

Texts/Observations:

Paul

(Romans 13:1–7)¹ 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.² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ 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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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.

- What, according to Paul, should be our default attitude to the governing authorities?
 - Cheerful obedience. Why?
 - To resist them is to resist God.
 - They are instituted by God
 - They are God’s servants for our good.

- They are ministers of God (God's **deacons**)
- What, according to Paul, are the civil magistrate's duties?
 - Approve (i.e. commend, praise, reward) good conduct (v3)
 - Punish (metaphorically "wield the sword") those who do wrong (v4)
- What according to Paul, are our duties to the civil magistrate? (v7)
 - Pay what is owed them (taxes and revenues)
 - Respect and honor them
 - **Not cranky, begrudging obedience.**

Peter

(1 Peter 2:13–17)¹³ *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

- What, according to Peter, should our default attitude to the governing authorities should be?
 - Subjection (to arrange oneself under, to be subordinate to)
 - To emperors and governors (v14)
 - For the Lord's sake (like Paul, acknowledging **who** put them in authority)
 - To silence those who accuse us of being scofflaws and brigands
- What, according to Peter, are the civil magistrate's duties?
 - Punish those who do evil (v14)
 - Praise those who do good (sound familiar?)
- What according to Peter, are our duties to the civil magistrate?
 - Live as people set free to serve God (not their own fleshly desires)
 - How? Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God.
 - Honor the emperor.

Note the striking similarities between Paul and Peter's descriptions of the duties of civil magistrates and those who live under their authority.

And if that is all we have on the subject, then we might very well conclude that we are to give unthinking, unreserved, unquestioned and unrestrained obedience to whomever God has placed over us in the civil realm.

But we are required by God to **interpret scripture with scripture**, harmonizing all of God's Word without elevating one passage over another.

Consider...

- The Hebrew midwives' disobedience of Pharaoh's decree
- Moses' disobedience of Pharaoh's decrees
- Rahab's disobedience to the rulers of Jericho
- David and Jonathan's disobedience of King Saul
- Elijah's disobedience of King Ahab
- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's disobedience of King Nebuchadnezzar

- Daniel's disobedience of King Darius

Which, no doubt, is why Jesus **did not** teach his disciples to give the authorities unthinking, unquestioned, unreserved authority.

(Matthew 22:17–21)¹⁷ *Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?* ¹⁸ *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax."* *And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

- Taxes and revenues? Sure, fine.
 - Supreme allegiance to Caesar? Nope, that belongs to God **alone**.
 - o Untold thousands of Christians died in the first century for their refusal to say, "Caesar is Lord" (i.e Lord higher than Jesus) and therefore were they considered threats to the "peace and safety" the Empire.
 - Jesus as Savior? Sure, fine, whatever.
 - Jesus as Lord? Nope. As long as your ultimate allegiance is not to the state, **you are a threat to public peace and safety**.
 - When Rome took their possessions away, Christians rejoiced remembering Jesus' promise that whatever they lost for his sake would be restored 100-fold.
 - o They knew a good investment when they saw one!
 - When Rome beat Christians, they, like the apostles, rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' sake.
 - So, Rome's only remaining solution was to kill the Christians (who rejoiced because as Paul said, "To live is Christ, to die is gain.")
 - NOTE: This is why, historically, Christianity has thrived in brutal regimes. The time-honored means of subjugating people don't work on Christians. In fact, they have just the opposite of the intended effect. For, as Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."
 - o And this is why the powers that be fear our gatherings: They are afraid that you will be reminded of the above and actually live as "free in Christ" **i.e. impossible to bend to their evil desires**.
- So...
 - o The OT abounds with examples of **righteous** civil disobedience.
 - o Jesus did not **absolutize** the obedience that we are to render to the civil authorities.
 - o Hmmm. Question: Did Paul and Peter ever add any clarifications to what they wrote in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2?
 - Yes, **with their lives**.
 - Peter (in Acts 12)

- After the angel broke Peter out of jail (itself an act of civil disobedience!)
- Peter made his way to the house of John-Mark
- And virtually disappears from the book of Acts, never to be heard from again; **a man on the run from civil authorities** until he was arrested and (according to church tradition) crucified upside down.
- I.e. Peter, following the likes of Daniel, in obedience to Jesus, did not absolutize civil obedience of which he wrote in his first epistle. And instead, when he realized that the magistrate had inverted God's design and were determined to punish, not a wrong doer, but someone doing good, then **Peter reluctantly disobeyed the disobedient magistrate.**
- Paul (in Acts 22)
 - Arrested by Roman tribune
 - About to be "examined by flogging"
 - Asked the tribune if it was "lawful" to flog an un-condemned Roman citizen.
 - i.e. Paul did not absolutize the tribune's **personal** authority.
 - Rather, he called the magistrate to live by the established laws of the land.
- Paul (in Acts 28)

(Acts 28:23–31)²³ *When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, **testifying to the kingdom of God** and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.* ²⁴ *And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.* ²⁵ *And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: ²⁶ " 'Go to this people, and say, "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." ²⁷ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' ²⁸ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." ³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ **proclaiming the kingdom of God** and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

- Paul was beheaded, for preaching Jesus as he did in Philippians 2:
 - God
 - Become flesh
 - In order to die for the sins of his people
 - Exalted for his willing obedience
 - Given a name above every other name
 - So that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord** to the glory of God the Father.

- ***That's why Paul was put to death.*** He died for his “civil disobedience”; his refusal to give Caesar his ultimate allegiance.
 - Instead, Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord of the empire, Lord of the family, and Lord of the church.
 - Remember: We're not pro “ecclesiology” but we, like Paul, are pro “theocracy”

Application

- Ask the right question
 - Not, “Is civil disobedience **okay** in certain situations?”
 - But, “When is civil disobedience **required**?”
 - The signers of The Declaration of Independence understood this distinction:

“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, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

- When is civil disobedience **required**?
 - When it is necessary to maintain or reestablish the **tensions** of sound government. Tensions? Yes, tensions.
 - E.g. the gravitational “tension” between the earth and moon, and both of them with the sun.
 - The gravitational tension between the moon and earth keeps our planet spinning on its axis. No spinning, no day and night. Permanent ice and scorching heat. Tension is a necessary good.
 - The gravitational tension between the sun and earth keeps the earth in orbit around the sun. No tension, no orbit. No orbit, no change of seasons necessary for most of life on our planet. Tension is a necessary good.
 - Governmental bodies in tension (as we have seen in weeks past)
 - Church and state
 - In the overlap of their spheres
 - Federal government – State government
 - People – Their elected officials
 - Limited delegated authority to three branches of government
 - Who exercise checks and balances upon one another
 - State and county government
 - This week, the commissioners of Chelan and Douglas counties along with 14 other counties in Eastern Washington, are asking Governor Inslee to relinquish the powers granted to him by his declared state of emergency to them, so that each county can do what is best for their citizens. Tension. Good tension.
 - When the proper tension is not maintained between these bodies of government, the state/nation tends toward either anarchy or tyranny.

- And that, beloved, is when civil disobedience is sometimes **necessary**, not just okay.
- Not to destroy government. Precisely the opposite. To preserve the tensions necessary for good government.
 - Why necessary? Because as the bible so clearly teaches, both governors and the governed are fallen creatures who need the rule of law to restrain sinful passions.
- A current **necessary** exercise of civil disobedience
 - Churches need to reclaim their right to determine when and how to meet in order to perform their God-given duties to minister Word and sacrament.

Four Final Admonitions:

- **One:** Understand the modern day equivalent of Peter's "emperor"
 - The USA is not a pure democracy, we are a constitutional republic.
 - Therefore, our highest authority is not any man, it is our state and federal constitutions. Which say:
 - Bill of Rights – Amendment I: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or **prohibiting the free exercise thereof**; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or **the right of the people peaceably to assemble**, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."
 - Art 1 Section of 11 of the Washington State Constitution: "**Absolute freedom** of conscience in all matters of religious sentiment, belief and worship, shall be guaranteed to every individual, and no one shall be molested or disturbed in person or property on account of religion; but the liberty of conscience hereby secured shall not be so construed as to excuse acts of licentiousness or justify practices inconsistent with the peace and safety of the state..."
- **Two:** From the tenor of Paul and Peter we learn that Christians should be known for their cheerful obedience to the magistrate, including the paying of taxes and revenues (ouch.)
 - Our civil disobedience should make others scratch their heads in wonder.
 - "Man, I didn't see that coming."
- **Three:** We need to conduct our civil disobedience in a way that demonstrates our gratitude for, and commitment to, good government.
 - We are not anti-government. We acknowledge that it is a creation of God and that it is necessary good.
 - So, we need to think, speak and act in ways that display our respect for government by seeking to **preserve the tensions necessary for good government**.
 - We are **not** seeking the overthrow of government.
 - We are seeking the reestablishment of tensions that will keep us from both anarchy and tyranny.
- **Four:** Live as free men and women

- As Peter wrote: *“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”*
 - Live as people set free from the law of sin death by the death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - All three governments depend on the “fourth government” of self-governance, which apart from Jesus’ finished work on the cross is mostly impossible.
 - Not fashioning your “freedom” into a club with which to beat others or institutions into submission. But rather living as (wait for it) **servants** of the living God, wholly submitted to Him and what **He** has revealed about the governance of the family, the church and the civil realm.
 - I.e. “Lead from the front” showing the magistrate what glad submission to a loving lord looks like.