

Romans 13:1-14 “Let’s Be Good Citizens, Part 2” 3/7/21

Remember I left you at a bit of a Romans 13 cliffhanger last week. After the service someone came up to me and said it was a “Who Shot JR?” moment. Now I know the reference but I had to remind this person I’m a technically a Millennial and that I was not yet born when the show Dallas aired. When I think cliffhanger I think of Back to the Future Part 1- when Doc says to Marty- “Roads? Where we’re going we don’t need roads.” as the DeLorean flies away... anyway, the cliffhanger is this- In Romans 13 Paul is telling us that Christians should submit to the governing authorities and honor them because it honors God who is sovereign over all earthly authorities...but it begs the question- Should we just let the government do whatever they want? Trample our freedoms? Create unjust laws? Redefine morality? Overreach their power in our religious rights? Does the government have any authority to tell the church if, when and how they can gather to worship? Is there ever justification for civil disobedience?

Today we are going to answer these questions. Now it’s necessary to frame this message with a couple introductory statements. #1 I am a pastor, not a politician and my competencies are in Theology not Political Science. So I’m not here to talk about political theory, the most strategic forms of protest or advocacy, or what policies are most effective to get the results. We want to see what God’s Word says and make application to our lives and leave the other stuff to those who are competent in that area. #2 The Bible is not a government policy manual. It does not attempt to tell us the right form of government, it says nothing of whether to join political parties. Be very skeptical of anyone who tells you the Bible is clear on these issues. The Bible is primarily about God pursuing, redeeming and restoring rebellious mankind for His glory, and the call to join Him in that mission. Now, that does not mean the Bible is silent on our questions for today. So let’s start by looking at **Two Biblical Filters for Civil Disobedience**. For the sake of brevity- I’m using **Civil Disobedience** to encompass any form of disagreement, protest or advocacy in opposition to an action, law or policy of the state.

Biblical Filter #1 Does it Directly Violate God’s Law?

Paul may hint at this in **Romans 13:4: *For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good.*** Since the state authorities are God’s servants the implication is that they have a responsibility to operate under God’s moral law. In the **Lion King**, King Mufasa was teaching a lesson to his young son Simba that even Kings were bound by authority and they served for the common good. Confused, Simba asks “I thought being a king meant that you can do whatever you want?” The state authorities answer to a higher authority, God, and so do we!

This is explicit many other places in Scripture. Acts 5, the Jewish authorities command Peter and the apostles to no longer preach Christ. How the apostles respond? “OK, the Bible says we must submit to the governing authorities.” No! **Acts 5:29 *We must obey God rather than any human authority.*** They were commanded by God to preach the gospel, this was a direct violation of God’s law, which always usurps man’s law. We see this example in the OT as well. Hebrew Midwives who refused to obey Pharaoh’s decree to slaughter the male children, SMA who would not worship the statue and were willing to go to the furnace for it. Or Daniel who

refused to stop praying and went to the lion's den. Tim Keller- "If the state commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, then civil disobedience is a Christian duty."¹

We have seen many examples of this throughout Christian history. The church of the first two centuries refused to declare Caesar is Lord under the conviction that doing so was worshipping him as a god. Instead, they said, Jesus is Lord. In doing so many were sent to the coliseum. The During the rise of Hitler, The German church was told they had to salute the Nazi flag and recognize Hitler as supreme leader. It was their refusal to do so that put a target on their backs as enemies of the state. Today, 245 Million Christians worldwide live in places where Christianity is illegal and the Bible is banned²- Christians continue to evangelize, read their Bibles and gather together for worship, obeying God not man.

Filter #1 Slide What about us? For now, we have been blessed to have wide protection under our law to freely exercise our faith and obey God's law without breaking the laws of our nation. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act passed in 1993 under President Bill Clinton, supported by both democrats and republicans, is one of the most important laws protecting the religious beliefs of all people, including Christians, from the overreach of the government, echoing the original intention of the separation of Church and State from the foundation of our country.³ We can share our faith, preach the Bible, we have the right to assemble freely to worship, to exercise our moral convictions and speak out on where we disagree- and in some cases, we even get tax benefits for doing so.

However, our religious freedom has been tested in recent years and will continue to be so into our future. Some likely scenarios will continue to revolve around the Biblical issues of the sanctity of human life (implications for abortion, disabilities, stem-cells, human engineering, end-of-life issues), and our Biblical convictions on sexuality and gender. And the civil disobedience on these issues may come if the state begins to impose upon our biblical convictions, policies and practices. A few examples: While all Americans have the right to marry whomever they wish, regardless of gender or sexuality, if the government ever attempted to force our pastors to perform same-sex ceremonies, we would have to obey God not man. Not fueled by hate, we love and welcome all people, but because we have a higher authority. If the government ever forced us to be silent about the gospel, that Jesus is the only way to heaven, and apart from Him we are lost forever, or refrain from teaching our convictions regarding what God says about morality. Obey God not man...even if it meant we lose our tax status or received penalties or worse. Not just for churches and pastors- If a boss requires you to lie to extend profits, or cover up sexual misconduct of a boss, or if a principle tells you that you cannot share your faith with your fellow students, or your spouse says you can't tithe your own money to the church, or teach your kids about Jesus... you must obey God not man. I pray that we would have the courage to do so, by God's grace.

¹ Tim Keller, *Romans For You*

² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/christian-persecution-by-the-numbers/>

³ More info on this: *Compassion & Conviction* from the AndCampaign

Filter #2 Does the it (action/Law/Policy) Violate the Higher Law of Love?

Romans 13:8-10

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder,"

"You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

In the context of submission to governing authorities, Paul appeals to the highest law, the law of loving your neighbor as yourself from the mouth of Jesus himself. What do we owe to our governing authorities? We owe them love for our neighbor. And there are times when the higher law of love may come in conflict with a law of the land. Following the law of love is often what got Jesus in trouble with the religious leaders. Jewish law forbids working on the Sabbath. In Matthew 12, Jesus and his disciples were hungry so they were gleaning grain in the field, considered work. The pharisees called them out on breaking the sabbath laws. But Jesus appealed to the higher law of love- if someone is hungry feed them- that's the loving thing to do.

Did you know there are over 100 verses that speak about justice for the poor and widow? And there are a hundred more that speak against the strong exploiting the weak. Jesus says they are all rooted in this one law- "Love your neighbor as yourself." Laws of justice are laws of love. This was the Biblical principle upon which Harriet Tubman and other workers of the underground railroad broke the southern slavery laws by hiding slaves and bringing them safely to the North. In more modern times, it was this higher law of love upon which MLK anchored the civil rights movement against Jim Crow segregation laws. MLK in Letter from a Birmingham Jail- "An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.

It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. It ends up relegating persons to the status of things."

The reason most white Pastors in the south refused to join MLK isn't because they thought Jim Crow laws were just. They didn't...it's because they were more concerned about protecting their own self-interests and their own rights, than doing what is right. When considering civil disobedience today, we must ask "How do I love my neighbor?" What is justice for all people, not just my people. Not primarily the question, "What is in my own best interest, my self-preservation, me getting ahead at the expense of others, me securing my rights and freedoms.

Are there laws or policies still today in America that are violations the higher law of love? Certainly, we do not have a perfect system. Some are clear, others require careful wisdom. The most clear violation of the law of love is legalized abortion, which does violence to the most

vulnerable population- the unborn who cannot speak for themselves. Others that require careful wisdom- ease of access to prescription drugs, prison system, health care, lending practices, policing, inequities in education. Which policies and reforms work best? This is where we must exercise wisdom and dialogue become so critical. Don't forget Christian freedom! For example: Poverty relief is part of loving our neighbor well. We should all find common ground there. But is more welfare or workfare, or living wage, or free healthcare the answer? God and people loving Christians may disagree on that. Good conversation- one isn't necessarily a bigoted elitist or a Marxist for disagreeing. Don't forget Christian freedom!

Ways to Practice God-Honoring Civil Disobedience 7 Ideas

God-honoring key word- go back and watch my message from Jan. 31...Well there is much more that can be said about this topic but I'm going to hit a few keys.

#1 It is our Christian Civic Duty.

Justin Giboney, Christian lawyer and political strategic, author of a new book **Compassion & Conviction**. "Romans 13 may at first appear to be a theological challenge the idea of engaging in protest...However, a better understanding of our particular system of government turns that logic on its head. Our government is a representative democracy. It is government of the people, for the people, and by the people. Through the electoral process we essentially hire officials to manage our own government. These are managers and servants, but the authority of the government rest ultimately with the people. The health of our government depends on an informed and rigorously engaged citizenry. Advocacy and protest are the tools we use to manage our elected servants. Because we live in a democracy, Romans 13 is not an injunction against protest and advocacy, but a mandate for it."⁴

#2 Pray: God's strong arm of justice moves in conjunction with the prayers of his children. You might not have a law degree, you don't know much about policy, but you can always Pray. for persecuted church, pray for the most vulnerable, for justice reform, for religious freedom.

#3 Vote: We have a responsibility to vote- although most eligible voters do not vote in local, state and primary elections. If you don't vote, don't complain.

#4 Advocate and Protest according to God's Values, Justice and Love.

Proverbs 31:8-9 *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Moses and Aaron advocated to Pharaoh on behalf of the Jewish people, as well as Esther. Jesus advocated for the woman caught in adultery. Almost every prophet in Scripture stood in protest to the political powers on behalf of God's values, justice and love. So too must the people of God speak prophetically as salt and light in our world today.

#5 Become a Public Servant

⁴ Justin Giboney, *Compassion & Conviction*

Proverbs 29:2 *When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.*

We need more Christians representing the righteousness, justice and love of God at the local level. Brandywine School District School Board- last election, elected with 402 votes.⁵

#6 Prepare for Persecution

1 Peter 3:14 *But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.* The leaders of the early church prepared the church to suffer for their faith without fear. We know almost nothing of this in America. The government asking you to wear your mask in church is not persecution, slow down on that... I don't believe in fearmongering and constantly be the "persecution is coming" pastor...but if it does, we need to be prepared. MLK asked the question of those practicing righteous civil disobedience- "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating? Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?"⁶

#7 Remember your Eternal Citizenship

No surprise- look at how Paul ends his instructions to citizens of the state.

Romans 13:11-12 *And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.*

Nik Ripken book *The Insanity of God*. He asked believers in China who are sometimes harassed by police there for gathering to worship, how they respond? He said, 'They replied: 'The police say, "If you do not stop these meetings, we will confiscate your house and we will throw you out into the street.' We respond, 'Do you want my house? Well, if you do, then you need to talk to Jesus because I gave the property to him.' They usually do not know what to make of that answer. So they say, "Well, we don't have any way to get to Jesus, but we can certainly get to you! When we take your property, you and your family will have nowhere to live!' And we respond, 'You must do what you must. But then we will be free to trust God for shelter as well as for our daily bread.' 'If you keep this up, we will beat you!' the persecutors will tell them. 'Then we will be free to trust Jesus for healing,' the believers respond. 'And then we will put you in prison!' the police threaten. 'Then we will be free to preach the good news of Jesus to the captives, to set them free. We will be free to plant churches in prison.' 'If you try to do that, we will kill you!' the frustrated authorities will vow. 'Then we will be free to go to heaven and be with Jesus forever.'"⁷

Hold lightly to your freedoms in this world...life is short, eternity is long. The most important question for any of us- is not, what are my rights? But am I right with God? Gospel-
communion.

⁵ https://electionsncc.delaware.gov/Brandywine/2017/br_mbr17.shtml

⁶ MLK Letter From a Birmingham Jail

⁷ As quoted by JD Greear, Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God*