

## Intro

If you're keeping up with the news, you know that a local pastor in Orrington has gone on record that his church will meet today in defiance of the Governor's orders. He believes that the church doesn't need government permission to meet, that God commands us to gather, that the cause of Christ is hurt by churches going underground, and that we must obey God rather than men.

So what should we make of this? Why aren't we meeting publicly today and ignoring the restriction on gatherings larger than ten? Are we disobeying God this morning? This morning I aim to clear up any confusion. By showing you how you can use your whole Bible to make informed decisions on current issues.

Today we ask this question:

**BIG QUESTION: When does God require us to act in civil disobedience?**

## PRAY

## Body

### Summary of the issue/Sermon purpose

Civil disobedience: "a public, nonviolent, and conscientious act contrary to law, usually done with the intent to bring about a change in the policies or laws of the government" - John Rawls

What do we find in Scripture that relates to our question?

### Theological Points

**Point 1: The default position of Scripture is obey governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17)**

### Explanation

#### READ Romans 13:1-7

Paul tells us to obey our governing authorities because all authority is from God, and because all governments in existence have been instituted by God (13:1). This means that every government in existence has been sovereignly placed in power by God ("those that exist have been instituted by God"). And because God has delegated authority and appointed the governments that exist, resisting governing authority is equivalent to resisting God (13:2).

Why did God establish human governments? So that good conduct would be rewarded and bad conduct would be punished (13:3-5). According to Paul, human government is a servant of God for our good, because governments execute judgment (God's wrath) on wrongdoers. So human governments exist for the benefit of their citizens. When the government is functioning rightly, it is serving the public good.

What do we owe to our government, whether state or national? We owe our government our obedience, our taxes, and our respect (13:1-2, 6-7). And we obey because law-breaking brings punishment (13:3-4) and because law-breaking troubles our conscience (13:5).

Romans 13 describes how governments are supposed to function, but doesn't speak to situations when a government is not fulfilling its God-appointed function. Generally, because governments are from God, we must obey our government.

## READ 1 Peter 2:13-17

Peter repeats much of Paul's discussion, but adds this: "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people (2:15)." What is this "doing good?" It's being subject to human authorities, which means obeying our government. And what ignorance do we silence when we obey our government? The various criticisms made against Christians (e.g., we're only concerned about ourselves, we think we're above the law, etc.). In other words, by obeying our government we do what is good, and we are silence accusations against us. In other words, obeying the government enhances the church's reputation. On the other hand, disobeying the government hinders the church's reputation.

And our freedom in Christ should be used, not for ourselves, but to honor everyone (our fellow citizens), to love the brotherhood (fellow believers), to fear God, and to honor the emperor (by implication President Trump and Governor Mills). Again, our default obedience to God is obeying our government.

A word of caution. The inconvenience of a government order doesn't justify our disobedience. And our disagreement with the reasonableness of a law doesn't give us freedom to disobey.

Illustration: 25mph sign

I'm not saying you have to agree with their policy. I'm not saying their judgments are wise. I'm saying that we can't break the law simply because we find it unreasonable.

So the default position of Scripture is that we must obey our government. But what about occasions when their laws conflict with God's laws?

### Point 2: Disobey the government when commanded to disobey God (Exod 1:15-22; Dan 3:1-30)

#### Explanation

- Long after Joseph, the Israelites increased greatly and Egypt became fearful, so Hebrew midwives were ordered kill male babies after they were born (1:16):

How did the midwives respond?

**Exodus 1:17** But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.

What was God's response? "So God dealt well with the midwives (1:20)." Pharaoh reacted by ordering his people to toss every Hebrew boy born into the Nile (1:22).

Moses' mother disobeyed the law by hiding Moses (Exod 2:2). And how did Scripture evaluate her disobedience?

**Hebrews 11:23** By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

According to the Hebrews author, disobeying Pharaoh was an act of faith. What do we learn here? Obeying the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment takes precedence over complying with government orders.

In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar orders every citizen to bow down to a massive golden idol whenever music is played. Well, three Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refused to comply and they were sentenced to death by a fiery furnace. However, God came to their aid, revealing his approval of their defiance.

What can we learn from this episode? Obeying the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> commandments has priority over complying with government orders. When the government orders us to sin, we must disobey.

### **Point 3: Disobey the government when prohibited from obeying God (Daniel 6:1-28; Acts 4:1-5:32)**

#### **Explanation**

In Daniel 6, King Darius signed off on a law that prohibited citizens from praying to any god or person. Citizens could only pray to Darius. So Daniel proceeded to pray as normal and was sentenced to death. However, God delivered Daniel confirming his approval of Daniel's disobedience.

In Acts 4, Peter and John were commanded "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18)." But they continued to speak about Jesus (4:31, 33) and were brought back to the council. When questioned, how did they respond?

**Acts 5:29** But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

In other words, our duty to God trumps our duty to our government. When the government prohibits us from carrying out God's commands, we obey God and reject what the government has ordered. God's law is higher than the government's law.

In Matthew 22:21, Jesus said this: "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

In other words, we have obligations to Caesar and we have obligations to God. So, combined with Acts 5:29, when Caesar's demands stand in the way of what we owe to God, God trumps Caesar. Our obligation to our God trumps our obligation to our government.

This occurs today in foreign nations where believers generally disobey government commands not to proselytize unbelievers and not to gather for corporate worship. In these cases, God's commands cannot be followed without disobeying earthly authorities. So Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 do not require uncritical compliance with the state. Christians should normally obey the state, but not always.

### **Point 4: Make full use of your rights as a citizen**

#### **Explanation**

When our protected rights are being taken away, there is a course of action we should choose before moving to civil disobedience. We should appeal to our rights as citizens.

In Acts 16, Paul was publicly beaten and imprisoned for casting a demon out of a slave girl, because it cost her owners in profits. In prison, Paul was miraculously delivered by an earthquake and the magistrates decided to release Paul and told him to go in peace.

But Paul wouldn't let it go. Why?

**Acts 16:37-38** But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." <sup>38</sup> The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.

Paul didn't say, "It's okay, I'm a Christian. After all Christians are supposed to be mistreated so I'll go along with it." No, he appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen.

Later in Acts 21-22, Paul's speech caused a Jewish riot and the tribune ordered for Paul to be examined by flogging. Paul appealed to his rights again:

**Acts 22:25-26** But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" <sup>26</sup> When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."

Paul appealed to his rights and saved himself from a beating. Like Paul, if our rights as citizens are being taken away, it is proper for us to appeal to the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. When we are being unjustly targeted for our faith, apathy is not the answer. If no one stands up for our rights as Christians, my children and my grandchildren suffer. This insight has corrected me this week. I am generally apathetic to legal issues, leave it to God's sovereignty, and embrace suffering if necessary. This is wrong. If we fail to fight legal and political battles today, evangelism and who knows what else will be illegal tomorrow.

- Illustration: Prior to Easter services in Louisville, Kentucky, Mayor Greg Fisher ordered Christians not to attend Sunday services on Easter, even if they remained *in their cars* to worship. So On Fire Christian Church sued the Mayor and the city. The U.S. District Judge sided with the church, arguing that drive-thru restaurants and liquor stores were still allowed to operate.
- Illustration: a local church in Augusta, in conjunction with the Christian Civic League of Maine, is putting together a proposal to the Governor's office for a prompt reopening of the churches. In doing so, they are using their connections in the city, going through the appropriate legal channels, taking health concerns seriously, and being careful to preserve the church's public witness.

So in summary, ordinarily we must obey our government, certain occasions require civil disobedience, and we should appeal to our rights as citizens.

### **Moving to a Solution**

Now to the question raised by Calvary Chapel in Orrington. Hebrews 10:25 prohibits us from "neglecting to meet together."

**Hebrews 10:24-25** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

So it stands to reason that Hebrews 10:25 indirectly commands us to gather. So aren't we disobeying God by obeying the Governor's orders? Shouldn't we obey God rather than men? To some of you it seems clear: God tells us we have to assemble and the Governor says we can't. So we have to gather on Sunday and accept the consequences whatever they may be. Before explaining why I think we should honor the Governor's orders, let me be clear here. Your wanting to gather is a good thing. We should never be satisfied with online church. And by saying we should go along with the Governor's orders I am not giving a public endorsement of her policies. No, I am simply saying civil disobedience is not required in this case, nor is it prudent. I believe we are not disobeying God if we obey the Governor's orders for several reasons.

### **Reason 1: In issuing this order, our government is fulfilling its God-given function**

We have seen why God raised up government structures: to serve the public good. The alternative is anarchy and chaos. So is there a compelling reason for the Governor to order radical measures for public safety at this time? Is our government seeking to protect its citizens? While you may disagree with the application, or the severity, while you may lament the economic implications, the current orders have this purpose: to save lives, to prevent the spread of the virus, and to prevent our hospitals from being overrun. Our government is doing the opposite of what Pharaoh did.

But what if church gatherings were suspended because of a tsunami? Or a hurricane? Would you fight a government order in cases like these? While the Coronavirus might not seem as pressing, the issue is the same: public good. We should obey our government here because they are seeking to fulfill their God-given function.

### **Reason 2: The current order does not target Christians**

The Governor's orders are not analogous to biblical cases of civil disobedience. Why? In Daniel and Acts, believers alone were targeted and persecuted by their authorities. But in our case, churches aren't the only targets. Local schools, restaurants, bars, sporting events, concerts, and a variety of businesses are also targeted by the Governor's orders. The Governor's motive isn't to restrict our religious duties. No, her motive is public safety and keeping the hospitals from being overrun. This is a far cry from persecution targeting Christians. If everyone else was allowed to reopen but churches were still restricted, we would need to respond. This is not that.

### **Reason 3: Civil disobedience would be damaging to our reputation**

Author Jonathan Leeman on why he recommends obeying the government's bans on gatherings:

"I believe it aids our witness. It shows care for the community and love for our neighbors. It shows that we care about their good, too, not just our own."

In our response, we must be careful to preserve our witness in our local community. What honor will Christ receive if we end up in the news for disobeying the Governor's orders? How would our local community perceive our defiance? What would civil disobedience communicate to our fellow citizens who are concerned about public safety? What would civil disobedience communicate to those in our community who are willing to submit the Governor's orders at great financial cost to themselves?

If you're thinking whether or not it's biblical to be concerned about our reputation with the world, remember that an elder "must be well thought of by outsiders (1 Tim 3:7)."

### **Reason 4: Obeying the Governor's orders is not a direct violation of Hebrews 10:25**

The word for neglecting can be translated "forsake, abandon, desert." It's the word Jesus used when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's the word Paul used to express Demas had deserted him (2 Tim 4:10). It's the word God uses when he says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb 13:5)." In context, in neglecting, or forsaking, the corporate gathering, these believers gave up on fellowship. This was something they were voluntarily choosing to do on their own. But this is not the case with us. We are not forsaking fellowship by our own decision. No, a pandemic and the government are forcing this upon us. When we watch this live stream, participate in Buddy's Zoom class, make phone calls, or do drive-in visits, we are obeying the spirit of Hebrews 10:25.

So complying with the Governor's orders is not 100% analogous with disobeying Hebrews 10:25: when we obey our government we are not willingly neglecting to fellowship (like being too lazy to get out of bed). We can obey the Governor and still find ways to gather, even if they are not ideal. In choosing not to gather, we are not rebelliously defying God. No, we are subjecting ourselves to our governing authorities as they seek to protect their citizens.

### **Reason 5: Consider the cost (Luke 14:25-33)**

In Luke 14, Jesus cautioned would-be followers to consider what they were getting into before committing to him. He used the illustration of builders who won't lay a foundation without first considering if they will be able to finish the project. And the illustration of kings who won't go to war without first considering whether or not they will be able to win. Likewise, consider the cost of civil disobedience in this case. Are the benefits of the edification of in-person worship worth the consequences of a Class E crime with penalties of up to six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine? If we defied the Governor and gathered publicly, would it likely lead to restrictions on large gatherings being overturned? Or would we be penalized in vain?

### **Conclusion**

In sum, I advise against civil disobedience today because we should obey our government when it fulfills its God-given function, Christians are not being targeted, resisting these orders could endanger our reputation, submitting to the orders isn't a violation of Hebrews 10:25, and it's not worth the cost.

A final exhortation: don't let Satan divide us over differences of opinion about the Governor's orders. Bear with those who are at risk and find the Governor's measures helpful. Bear with those who are eager to assemble together and find her orders overly restrictive. There is great potential for division among us here. Beware of Satan's schemes! Don't let Satan win here. Bear with one another in love. You have done a great job caring for one another during this unique season.