

“God and Country”  
Romans 13:1-7  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Romans 13:1-7 “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.<sup>3</sup> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.<sup>4</sup> For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.<sup>6</sup> This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing.<sup>7</sup> Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

When I was a student at the University of Minnesota I had several acquaintances who refused to register for the draft.

It was during the Vietnam War and not registering was against the law.

Were those men right or were they wrong?

Many of you know of the book *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

You may not know that the author John Bunyan spent from 13 to 15 years in prison because he refused to obey the law, which said that he had to register with the government to be a preacher of the Gospel.

Was he right or was he wrong?

In the 1960s religious conservatives were using Romans 13 to argue against those in the civil rights movement who were breaking the Jim Crow laws of the south.

By the 1980s, in the early Christian school movement, religious conservatives were ignoring Romans 13 and arguing from Acts 5:29, that they must obey God rather than man.

Today some would argue that it is biblically wrong to withhold taxes in opposition to the war in Iraq but biblically right to withhold taxes in opposition to federally funded abortion.

We tend to cite Romans 13:1 or ignore it, depending on “whose ox is being gored.”

I’m afraid that there are too many of us Christians who are not at all unlike the general population when it comes to our attitude toward the government.

We like it, if it supports our views and doesn’t impose too high a tax, but we rail against it if we disagree or it costs us too much.

We are in the midst of the 2008 political season.

The media and the politicians play on emotions; the more passionately for or against someone the better they like it.

People are encouraged to not just disagree but dislike.

Christians get caught up in hating the Clintons or George Bush. We engage in personal attacks on Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama or John McCain.

But God calls us to a different attitude and a different response - “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities; Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

This text of Scripture raises some serious questions but before addressing them, I want you to see why Paul discusses our attitude toward governing authorities at this point in his letter.

At the beginning of chapter 12 Paul sets the agenda for the rest of his letter when he writes, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then

you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Beginning in verse 3 Paul then describes our relationship to each other as being both the means and the manifestation of transformed living.

Humility and service to each other is how we grow to be more like Christ and demonstrate that we do in fact belong to Christ.

Then beginning at verse 9, Paul spells out a number of ways that this transformed living expresses itself.

First in love and devotion to one another and then, beginning in verse 17, Paul reminds us of the Christ-like response even to those who abuse us.

Romans 12:17-19, 21 “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

In Rome, though the persecutions were not yet as severe as they would become, there were probably no groups who had more reason to fear and even hate the governing authorities than Jews and Jewish and Gentile Christians.

And so speaking of evil, revenge and enemies, Paul turns his attention to the leading instigators of the abuse of the church – the government.

Just as today, so then there were people who were anti-government. I don't mean the “loyal opposition,” but those who spoke and acted as if all government were bad.

And so chapter 13:1-7 speaks to what living a transformed life looks like in relationship to the government, even a godless government.

As I tried to illustrate earlier, this text is relevant to us both in terms of just and unjust laws but even more so in terms of our attitudes.

So what does the text teach?

The basic command is very straightforward: Romans 13:1 “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities...”

“Everyone” must mean all the Christians to whom Paul is writing in Rome AND by implication, us as well.

“Governing authorities” are clearly the local and national governmental officials, which in that time were not just pagan but outright anti-Christian.

Now most importantly is the word “submit.”

This is not the word for obey.

This is not a blanket command to obey every law of government whether it just or unjust.

Submission here, as in Ephesians 5 where Paul talks about submitting to each other and wives submitting to their husbands, is not a matter merely of outward obedience but it is a deeper matter of the heart-attitude toward each other.

The idea of submitting is to put the other’s interests first.

Submitting to them is respecting them - in honor preferring them.

It is a predisposition that says unless there is compelling reason to do otherwise, I will yield to their desires.

Let’s stop for a minute and do a reality check.

Have I overstated the case?

When you see the word “submit” used elsewhere in the Bible, does it mean what I have said here – a basically compliant attitude – putting the interests of the other first?

Is it possible that Paul is indicating that this is to be our basic posture, our predisposition toward governing authorities?

I think it is!

Why?

**The first reason is found in verse 1: “for there is no authority except that which God has established.”**

Authority is from God.

He is the source of all authority, be it in the church, the home, or in the government.

Authority is not self-derived nor even, contrary to our Declaration of Independence, “from the consent of the governed.”

All authority is from and owes allegiance to God himself whether it is recognized now or not.

That’s very important for what we’re going to see later about civil disobedience.

**The second reason is this: Not only is all authority from God but also, “The authorities that exist have been established by God.**

I think Paul might have expounded this idea like this:

“To you Christians in Rome, I want you to know I’m not speaking hypothetically about some government, somewhere, sometime. I am talking about your government. I’m talking about the Roman authorities. I’m talking about the soldiers that you bump into on the street. I’m talking about the Caesars themselves. Your government, this government is from God.”

Paul says your government has been “established” by God.

That means it is ordained, instituted, or appointed by God.

In Daniel (2 and 4) and Exodus (9) and numerous other places throughout the Bible, it very clearly tells us that God sets kings up and God takes them down.

God brings them into being and God removes them.

God, the ultimate source of authority, is the one who has established the Roman government.

And our government and all governments today have been established by God.

Granted, there are intermediary means that have brought them to power (heredity, force or vote) and they may misuse their authority but their existence is by God’s permission.

**Reason number three for why we should “submit to governing authorities” is in verse 3:**

**“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.**

I believe with Augustine, Calvin, Hodge, and with most of the theologians down through the centuries, that man is born a sinner and that if God did not intervene in some way, man would ruin, not only himself, but also all society by his sinful actions.

God, in his grace, has instituted government to restrain evil and to promote good.

I would hate living in Sudan, Somalia or the Congo with the anarchy that reigns.

Government is for an orderly society; for that reason, you are to submit to the governing authorities.

**The fourth reason to submit is given to us in verse 4:**

**“For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”**

The governing authorities are God’s servants.

The word is “deacon.”

Bill Ritter, Ken Salazar, maybe John McCain or Hillary Clinton are God’s deacons.

God is using his deacons to carry out his purposes.

In Acts 4, as an illustration, Peter was preaching and he referred to the governing authorities responsible for Jesus’ death.

Acts 4:27-28 “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”

Those authorities were accomplishing God's purposes, even though they didn't know it.

Submit to governing authorities because:

1. All authority is from God.
2. The authorities that exist have been established by God.
3. Governing authorities maintain a civil society.
4. They are God's deacons carrying out his purposes.

**Now the summary of the argument is found in verse 5:**

"Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."

Paul restates the command to submit to governing authorities but then adds to what he has already said.

Here he gives two reasons to submit: "because of possible punishment" AND "because of conscience."

Back in verse 2 **Paul had addressed the first of these:** "he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

The argument is simply this: if you resist authority, you can expect judgment.

When Paul uses the word "judgment" he gives the idea that God himself will be involved in the penalty inflicted on those who refuse to live in subjection to the governing authorities.

This idea of submitting to governing authorities is not a trifling matter – it is as serious as obeying God.

**The second reason, Paul gives in verse 5, is "because of conscience."**

"Conscience" here doesn't mean feeling guilty, it means being aware that by submitting to governing authorities we are actually submitting to God.

Again, back in verse 2 Paul said it this way: "he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted."

The Apostle Peter put it this way: 1 Peter 2:13-14 “Submit yourselves **for the Lord’s sake** to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, <sup>1Pe</sup>  
<sup>2:14</sup> or to governors...”

Our submission to authority is not only because we might be punished but also because, based on conscience, we choose to honor the Lord who has ordained that authority.

**The conclusion of the argument, then, is in verses 6 and 7.**

If we live in submission to governing authorities it will manifest itself, at least in these two ways:

1. **Pay your taxes.** That’s right. Support the governing authorities. They are from God. It is appropriate that they be supported.
2. **Give them proper respect.** “if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

I’d like to finish the message this morning with a number of applications that I think we can draw from this text and related texts.

The first of them is this:

1. Our basic posture toward governing authorities is **a readiness to submit** to their authority.  
We don’t assume a cynical attitude but a compliant attitude – not a resistance but an openness to their authority.
2. Our obligation as a Christian is **to honor governing authorities** as from God. Not flattery, but due respect.  
It means that our basic attitude toward police, toward local officials, toward elected, as well as appointed officials, is to honor them – certainly not speaking of them in disparaging ways.
3. **Pay taxes to support them** (Romans 13:6). They are ministers of God and they are to be supported as surely as ministers in the local church are to be supported. Pay your taxes.

4. In 1 Peter 2:12, the Apostle Peter writes, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

Our obligation is to be **mature, disciplined Christian Citizens.**

When the governing authorities think of Christians they ought to be able to say, “Of all of the citizens, Christians are the most honorable, Christians are the ones who are most respectful, Christians are the ones who are easiest to like.

They live good lives, moral lives, upright lives and thereby silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”

There are a lot of “kooks” that bring reproach to the name of Christ; people who fancy themselves on some kind of crusade, battling the wrong battles, enter into things that are so foolish that they make the name of Christ look foolish.

There are people who by their actions, their words, their anger, by the way they treat civilian authorities, bring reproach on the name of Christ.

Live mature, disciplined, holy lives before governing authorities.

5. **Pray for governing authorities.** In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, the apostle Paul sets forth that command.

As much as you pray for one another, as you are commanded to pray for God’s kingdom work, it is also a command of the word of God that we are to pray for the governing authorities.

6. By way of implication, one of our obligations is **informed participation.**

I take you back to the word “submit” as it is used here and as it’s used in Ephesians 5.

It means caring about the governing authorities, being aware, learning about them.

It means caring about what they care about.

It means registering, learning about the issues, speaking out, voting.

Democracy is dependent on the informed consent of its people; and Christians, ahead of everybody else, ought to be involved in that process.

There are those who don't get involved in the government, thinking that somehow it's holier to withdraw, not get involved. They are wrong.

I think the word of God, when it talks about submitting, has to do with informed participation.

7. We are to **bear arms on behalf of our government**, if it is a just cause.

I want you to hear my clearly, that there are Godly, Bible-believing, Christians with whom I will spend eternity in heaven, who have a very different view of this than I do.

While I believe they are genuinely Christian, I believe they are wrong if they hold a pacifist view.

Jesus did not tell the soldiers to put down their arms. He told them to be good soldiers. (Luke 3:14)

I do not believe you can find any place in the scripture where it either explicitly or implicitly teaches that we should not restrain evil with force if necessary.

Within our own country, we all know that it is necessary with some people, to physically restrain them.

We have prisons; we have jails.

I believe it is just as possible, that there will be times in the life of a country, when it will be necessary to restrain outside influences and it will be necessary to restrain them with force.

We are to bear arms on behalf of our government if it is a just cause.

8. I also believe that one of the obligations of a Christian, in relationship to his government, is **responsible opposition**.

In Mark 6:18, John the Baptist, at the cost of his head I might remind you, criticized the government.

He could not allow the immorality of the king to go unchallenged.

He spoke against the king and it finally cost him his life.

Responsible criticism is appropriate from Christian people.

It is our responsibility to help governing authorities understand that authority is from God, and as long as they live within the parameters of their authority, they are correct.

But when they move outside and begin to do something that is not their authority, it is the Christian's obligation, out of respect for God's authority, to criticize and correct if possible.

9. To that end I believe that one of the Christian's responsibilities toward governing authorities is **disobedience when obedience to the government would mean disobedience to God.**

Earlier I said the command of God is for us to submit to governing authorities.

That word submit is not blind compliance but a predisposition to comply as long as it does not mean disobedience to God.

Several years ago, William Bontrager, a county judge in Indiana, ruled in the case of Harry Palmer.

Harry was a Vietnam veteran. He returned from war, was married and had two children, but Harry committed first degree burglary.

It was a first offense and there were many other mitigating circumstances, but William Bontrager, as the judge, knew the law said he had to sentence Harry to 10-20 years in prison for that burglary.

But Bontrager said he couldn't do it.

You see, just 18 days after Harry Palmer's arrest, the Indiana legislature had agreed that such sentencing rules were too strict and they changed the law.

But because Palmer had been arrested 18 days earlier, the law still held.

He had to spend 10-20 years in prison.

Bontrager said, "Before God, I cannot do that. That is unjust. I must resist it."

So, instead of sentencing Harry, Bontrager declared that law unconstitutional and sentenced Palmer to one year in prison.

Palmer spent that year in prison as a model prisoner, came out, went back to work, paid back the people he had burglarized, was a model citizen and it looked like a model case of rehabilitation.

One problem, the prosecuting attorneys did not like what Bontrager had done.

They went to the Supreme Court and that Court ruled that Bontrager had done something unlawful and they ordered him to impose the 10-20 year sentence on Harry, who by then was out of prison.

Again Bontrager said he couldn't do it and after exhausting his options, he resigned his judgeship.

Palmer is serving a 10-20 year prison sentence in Indiana.

And Bontrager was fined and sentenced to a year in prison.

But ironically his sentence was suspended.

Here was a man, and there have been many others like him who have said, along with Peter in Acts 5:29, "I must obey God, rather than man." (From Colson's Loving God)

When a government commands that which contradicts God's laws, the Christian has an obligation to disobey.

Francis Schaeffer wrote, "If there is no place for civil disobedience, if there is no place for breaking the law, then the government has been made autonomous and, as such, has been put in the place of God."

Authority is from God. And when the governing authorities usurp an authority that is not theirs, they take the place of God, and it is a Christian's obligation to resist and respond.

Jesus said "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but render to God the things that are God's."

Civil disobedience is not anarchy.

Anarchy is no law.

Civil disobedience is appealing to a higher law  
– God's law.

How does one know when disobedience is called for?

A Christian is not an anarchist.

The Christian is one who believes that all authority comes from God and that the governing authorities are from God and that we are to submit to them.

For the Christian to break the law is an extremely serious matter.

Knowing when and how to exercise civil disobedience, while maintaining a submissive attitude, is a difficult matter.

It would take another sermon to address this issue.

Fortunately others have provided help and I have included their words as an appendix to this sermon on-line.

I don't think, however, that such a decision is arrived at easily.

I believe God has left us to struggle with applying the principles of the word of God to given situations and say "Is this the time, is this the issue?"

Can I be in subjection to the governing authorities, but in this particular instance disobey?"

I believe that in the years ahead, Christians will be called on increasingly to commit civil disobedience.

I'm afraid that there are indications that the state will increasingly encroach on religion.

Christians may be called upon to say, "No, I cannot obey that law. I must obey God, rather than man.

It may happen in reference to unjust economic policies that are oppressing poor countries and poor people.

It may happen that we'll be called on to be part of an unjust war.

It may be about abortion.

How long do we appeal, write letters and protest?

How long before Christians must disobey?

But as I said a moment ago, for a Christian to come to that place will be very difficult.

It will stretch your mind and break your heart if you're a Romans 13 Christian.

Because as a Christian Citizen you will want to live in submission to the governing authorities as unto the Lord.

### **Additional notes:**

See "Tale of Two Citizenships" Special Topics at [www.soundliving.org](http://www.soundliving.org)

### **On Civil Disobedience:**

By John Piper from a sermon delivered on July 10, 2005

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/10/215\\_Subjection\\_to\\_God\\_and\\_Subjection\\_to\\_the\\_State\\_Part\\_3/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/10/215_Subjection_to_God_and_Subjection_to_the_State_Part_3/)

"So today the question is twofold: 1) What is the evidence from the Bible that God sometimes approves of his people not submitting to the very authority he had put in place? That is, what is the evidence for God-approved civil disobedience? And 2) when is such civil disobedience right, and what should it look like? These are huge questions and whole books have been written on them. But if that stopped us from preaching, we would preach on nothing worth thinking about.

### **Biblical Examples of Disobedience to Civil Authorities**

Consider a few texts on disobedience to civil authorities. I referred last week to Acts 5:27-29 where Peter and the apostles say,

“We must obey God rather than men.” In other words, even though God said to submit to the men in authority, he does not mean: Obey them when they forbid what I command or command what I forbid. The command to submit to man does not make man God. It gives man authority *under* God, and qualified *by* God.

So let’s turn to some examples where that qualification lead to disobedience.

*Daniel 6:6-10* Then these presidents and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live for ever! All the presidents of the kingdom . . . are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, 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. . .” Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

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; and he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

Notice how blatant Daniel’s disobedience is. It is, as we say, in your face. When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house, where he had *windows* in his upper chamber—*upper* chamber!—opened toward Jerusalem. And he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God as he had done previously. This was an open act of disobedience to the civil authority. It was a public act of putting God before the king’s decree. He took his place at an upper window, so he could be clearly seen. And for it he was thrown to the lions. Which he did not resist. Keep in mind that there is no explicit commandment that one must pray on one’s knees at an open window three times a day. This was Daniel’s conviction about God’s will, not an explicit command in the Bible.

*Daniel 3:9-18* The case of Daniel’s friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, was slightly different. The decree was made that all should bow down before the king’s image. In other words, Daniel was forbidden to do a thing, and his friends were commanded to do a thing. They would not. Instead, they said:

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it 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 which you have set up.

This was civil disobedience on the basis of religious conscience. And for it they were thrown into the furnace. And they did not resist.

**Exodus 1:15-20** Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives . . . “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birth stool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. . . So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very strong. The midwives disobeyed the king’s order to kill the babies.

One response to these last two texts is that they portray disobedience to a command that *requires sin*. What about civil disobedience to laws that are not requiring you to do anything. They are just forbidding you from doing something that you feel morally bound to do.

Besides the case of Daniel, the Bible gives several other examples (e.g., Kings 18:4,13; Joshua 2:3-4). For example, Queen Esther is honored for disobeying the law against unsolicited approach to the king. King Ahasuerus had decreed that Jews were to be annihilated young and old, women and children (Esther 3:13). Mordecai, Esther’s uncle asked Esther to intervene for the Jews to save their lives.

Esther’s response was to remind Mordecai that any unsolicited approach to the King was against the law. She could be killed (4:11-12), unless the king had mercy on her and raised his scepter. Mordecai answered that Esther may well have come to the kingdom for such a time as this (4:14). So Esther calls for a three-day fast. Finally she resolves, “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (4:16). The effect of her intervention was that the Jews were spared.

There are at least three features of Esther’s disobedience that stand out: 1) The law Esther broke did not require any active evil of her. It only stood in the way of trying to save the Jews. 2) There was no guarantee that her disobedience would be successful. It might have only galvanized the king’s opposition to the Jews. She risked it because so much was at stake. 3) Her act of disobedience to the

state is not incidental to the main point of the book. It is the heart of her sacrificial faith: “If I perish, I perish!”

But even if there were no explicit instances of civil disobedience in the Bible we would have to ask some tough questions: Is it morally right to jay walk to stop a rape? Is it morally right to break the speed limit to rush a dying wife to the hospital? Is it right to break into a neighbor’s house to put out a fire—or save a child?

Under what conditions, then, might civil disobedience be morally called for? One could say with the apostle Peter: Obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). In other words, if the law commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands then you must break the law. But the problem with that simple guideline is that much of the civil disobedience in history has involved doing things that are not clearly commanded by God. Sitting down on the sidewalk in front an abortion clinic in 1989 was not explicitly commanded by God in the Bible. Eating in a white-only restaurant in St. Augustine, Florida in 1964, and marching and praying in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 were not commanded explicitly in the Bible.

In other words, some Christians have come to the point in history where they believed laws were so unjust and so evil, and political means of change had been frustrated so long, that peaceful, non-violent, civil disobedience seemed right. What factors should we take into consideration to decide if we should do that kind of civil disobedience? It seems to me that it would be a combination of at least these four things.

The *grievousness* of the action sanctioned by law. How atrocious is it? Is it a traffic pattern that you think is dumb? Or is the law sanctioning killing?

The *extent* of the unjust law’s effect. Is it a person affected here or there? Or is it millions? Does the law have an incidental inconsistency? Or is it putting a whole group of people into bondage because of their ethnic origin?

The potential of civil disobedience for *clear and effective witness to the truth*. This is the question of strategy, and there will certainly be room here for differing judgments about whether a particular act of civil disobedience will be a clear and effective statement of what is just.

The movement of the spirit of courage and conviction in God in people’s lives that indicates the time is right. Historically, there appears to be a flash point of moral indignation. An evil exists for

years, or perhaps generations, and then something strange happens. One person, and then tens of thousands of people, can no longer just get up and go to work and say, “I wish it weren’t this way.” A flash point is reached, and what had hung in the air for years as tolerable evil explodes with an overwhelming sense that this state of affairs simply can no longer be!

So if and when that time comes, how should civil disobedience be carried out? What should it look like?

### **Non-Resistance and Active Love for Your Enemy**

Let’s look at the demands of love in Matthew 5:38-48. These are tough paragraphs about non-resistance and active love for your enemy. First, Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who asks from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. (vv. 38-42)

All of those verses are intended to show compliance to one who mistreats you or asks you for something. This looks like the opposite of resistance. Now here comes something a little different in verses 43-48: active love rather than non-resistance.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. . . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (vv. 43-48)

Here a different note is struck. The emphasis falls on seeking the good of the enemy. Love your enemy. Pray for your enemy—presumably that he would be saved and find hope and life in Christ. Do good to your enemy the way God does with rain and sunshine. So in verses 38-42 the note of compliance is struck (don’t resist, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile). But in verses 43-48 Jesus strikes the note of positive actions for the good of your enemies with a view to their blessing.

Now this raises the question whether the non-resistance and compliance of verses 38-42 is always the best way to love others and do them good as in verses 43-48. One focuses on passivity—don’t

retaliate, be willing to suffer unjustly. The other focuses on activity—seek to do good for your enemy. Is passivity always the best way to do good?

The answer becomes more clear when we realize that in most situations of injustice or persecution we are not the only person being hurt. For example, how do you love two other people if one the criminal and the other is the victim—if one is hurting and the other is being hurt? Is love passive when it is not just your cheek that is being smacked but someone else's—and repeatedly?

Or what about the command to give to the one who asks. Is it love to give your coat to a person who will use it to strangle an infant? And how do you go the extra mile (lovingly!) with a person who is taking you along to support his bloodshed? Do you go the extra mile with a person who is making you an active accomplice to his evil? The point of these questions is this: In these verses Jesus is giving us a description of love that cuts to the depth of our selfishness and fear. If selfishness and fear keep us from giving and going the extra mile, then we need to be broken by these words. But Jesus is not saying that passive compliance in situations of injustice is the only form of love. It can be a form of cowardice.

When love weighs the claims of justice and mercy among all the people involved, there can come a moment, a flash point, when love may go beyond passive, compliant non-resistance and drive the money changers from the Temple (Mark 11:15).

### **Guidelines for How Christians Should Engage in Civil Disobedience**

What guidelines are there, then, for how a Christian will perform civil disobedience? The words of Jesus rule out all vindictiveness and all action based on the mere expediency of personal safety. The Lord cuts away our love for possessions, and our love for convenience. That's the point of Matthew 5:38-42. Don't act merely out of concern for your own private benefit, your clothes, your convenience, your possessions, your safety.

Instead, by trusting Christ, become the kind of person who is utterly free from these things to live for others (both the oppressed and the oppressors; both the persecuted and the persecutors; both the dying children and the killing abortionists). The tone and demeanor of this Christian civil disobedience will be the opposite of

strident, belligerent, rock-throwing, screaming, swearing, violent demonstrations.

We are people of the cross. Our Lord submitted to crucifixion willingly to save his enemies. We owe our eternal life to him. We are forgiven sinners. This takes the swagger out of our protest. It takes the arrogance out of our resistance. And if, after every other means has failed, we must disobey for the sake of love and justice, we will first remove the log from our own eye, which will cause enough pain and tears to soften our indignation into a humble, quiet, but unshakeable, NO. The greatest battle we face is not overcoming unjust laws, but becoming this kind of people.

February 17, 2008