

Is It Ever Right to Disobey Uncle Sam?

Romans 13:1-7

February 27th, 2011

A general principle that Scripture taught us from the last lesson is the citizens of a country are to be submissive to their civil leaders because God has ordained the authority in government. God actually classifies government leaders as His deacons, His servants, or His ministers, in order to keep disorder from society. God has given the right to the government to tell us what we can and cannot do, and has given the government the right to enforce that so that there will be order in society. But Christians are sometimes called upon to live under the leadership of a non-Christian government. So that raises this question; is it ever okay to disobey the government? In particular, we're going to talk about Christians living under the leadership of God's deacons, God's ministers, or 'Uncle Sam.'

Scripture

"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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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, 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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 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."

Principles of Disobedience

I learned from my parents that I was to respect authority. As a kid, I learned to be under the authority of my parents at home. I knew that when I went certain places I was not under my own authority, but I was under the authority of others. When I went to school I was under the authority of the school teacher and the principal. When I went to church I knew that I was under the authority of my Sunday school teacher. When I went to my grandparents' home, they were the authority figures in my life. And even when I went to visit my cousins I knew I was under my uncle's authority.

For some reason we have affectionately labeled our government as Uncle Sam. The question I want to ask from a biblical, not philosophical, perspective is, "Is it ever right to disobey Uncle Sam?" What if you were a Christian living during the days of Adolf Hitler? What if you were living in Libya at this very moment? In the history of the United States, has there ever been a time when it was okay for Christians and non-Christians to disobey Uncle Sam? From a biblical perspective, yes, there are times when it is right for us to disobey Uncle Sam. First, when Uncle Sam commands us to do what God forbids us to do, we must disobey Uncle Sam's commands. Secondly, I believe Scripture teaches it is okay to disobey Uncle Sam when Uncle Sam forbids us to do something that God has commanded us to do.

Scripture specifically gives us two incidences when we have the right as citizens of a Heavenly kingdom to disobey our earthly rulers. The general and the specific principle is that God's law always supersedes man's law.

- **Principle One: It is okay to disobey your government if it commands us to do something forbidden by God's teaching.**

The book of Exodus opens by declaring there is now a Pharaoh sitting on the throne of Egypt who does not remember Joseph. Can you imagine being an Egyptian knowing how important Joseph was to your country, and now the man in charge of the government and the lives of the Egyptian people does not remember Joseph? He looks out one morning and he notices how the Hebrew people are growing larger and larger, and he begins to fear them. He begins to implement policies to curtail their growth as a people, and the more he tries to keep them from growing, the more God blesses them. Then, about the time that God is going to bring forth Moses as the leader who will lead Israel out of Egypt, Pharaoh decides that the only way to control the population and expansion of the Israelite people is to kill all the male babies. He instructs the Egyptian midwives to kill every male Israelite baby that is born. The Bible specifically says that the midwives of Egypt did not kill the Hebrew male children. Pharaoh challenges them on why they have disobeyed him, and they lied. They invent this story that the Israelite ladies are more vigorous in child birth than Egyptian ladies and by the time we get to the bedroom to deliver the child, the baby has already been born and it is already half grown. So, the Bible says that God blessed the Egyptian midwives with families of their own. Pharaoh specifically commanded his people to do what God had forbidden, to take life unjustly, and he blessed the ladies who did not listen to the government.

Then in the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians go to Israel into the southern kingdom of Judah, and they take the best youth out of the land. Among them are Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are chosen to be in a contest where the best youths of the land are going to be chosen to minister in the presence of King Neb himself. So now you have Israelites living in Babylon under the orders of the Babylon government. Ashpenaz, the chief of King Nebuchadnezzar's unit, is put in charge of these youths to get them ready to stand before the

king. Ashpenaz commands all of these youths to eat a certain diet. When the four Hebrew children recognize they've been commanded to eat something that God tells them not to eat, Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's meat, and he didn't.

Here is another example where God specifically gives us the right to disobey is when we're commanded to do something that is forbidden. In Matthew 2, Herod is sitting on the throne, Jesus has been born in Bethlehem, and wise men come from the east seeking the birth of the new born king of the Jews. Herod gets paranoid so he ordered the execution of all the male children two years old and younger. An angel of the Lord immediately breaks into the life of Joseph and warns him to flee from this unjust law, this unjust rule, and he takes Jesus from Bethlehem into Egypt.

Under the authority of God's Word, generally, you and I as citizens must submit to the laws of our government. But when the laws of our government command us to do something that God forbids, we are not to obey Uncle Sam.

- **Principle Two: We are not to obey Uncle Sam when he forbids us to do something that God commands.**

A prime example of this is in Daniel, chapter 6. It starts out with the first principle. King Nebuchadnezzar made a large statue and made a law that at a certain sound of a certain song by a certain musical group, everybody must bow down to that false image of King Nebuchadnezzar. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said we will not bow. They said we may burn for this, but we will not bow. They did not do what the government told them to because they were commanded to do something they were forbidden to do. But now, Daniel finds himself in another situation to where he is forbidden to do what God has commanded. Being a Jew, Daniel knew God's command to worship Him and put no other gods before Him. Daniel now understands that the government has passed a law, and for thirty days no one living in Babylon could pray to any god other than the ruler, King Darius. Daniel disobeys the government and he prays to God anyway; the Bible says three times a day.

In the New Testament, the apostles are called on the carpet before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin are the rulers of the Jewish people. In Acts 4, the apostles are commanded not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus. The apostles told those civil leaders (their government), *look, you judge what you think is right in this matter, but we just want you to know that we're going to do what God has commanded us to do, and that is to preach and teach.* So they disobeyed the government and kept preaching and teaching, and they wound up in jail. Later, they are called to give an account and Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men." Now, let's not forget that Jesus Himself told us render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but to render to God what is God's. If Uncle Sam ever commands us to do what is forbidden, or forbids us to do what is commanded, I submit to you that as a church, or as citizens of this great country we love, we must obey God rather than men.

Since the close of the New Testament, many, many, thousands of Christians have been put in the position where the laws of their country either command something that is forbidden, or forbids something that is commanded. In 298 A.D., the Roman soldier, Marcellus, had come to faith in Jesus Christ. He was a centurion in Rome's army. Upon becoming a Christian, he understood that he was forbidden to declare loyalty to any god other than his God, the true God. At that time, in order to be a Roman soldier and wear the uniform of Rome, one had to declare loyalty to Caesar. He had to declare that Caesar was Lord and would serve no other but Caesar. Marcellus refused to declare loyalty to Caesar and he lost his life because he chose to obey God rather than man.

In the 1930's, a man in Germany by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor and theologian in what was then the Lutheran Church, quickly realized before other Christians did that the man who was coming to power in Germany was not of God. His name was Adolf Hitler, and he was not for the people of Germany. Dietrich warned the Church, the nation, and the community against accepting this man's belief of National Socialism. All the other pastors in Germany bowed down to this rising political star, except Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a few others. They initially had to leave the denominations of that day in Germany and they founded what was called the Concession Church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer worked tirelessly for two years and went underground training pastors against the socialism of Hitler. He

eventually lost faith in the people of Germany and actually left Germany and went to London, England, to pastor two German speaking churches. He would later come to the United States and he would write that it was the biggest mistake he ever made in his life to leave his people in their greatest hour of persecution. After thirty days in the United States, he came to realize that he would not be able to help reconstruct German life after Hitler's fall, (if he fell) so he went back to Germany and joined the German military intelligence. I personally want to say here that I believe Dietrich Bonhoeffer was correct in everything he did up to this point. And out of his life of suffering came one of the greatest books ever written by man that was not inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. His book was called The Cost of Discipleship. It can't even be fathomed by the Church in America, but when he went back and joined the German military intelligence, he began to do what God forbade man to do, and that was to take justice in his own hands. According to history, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to plot the assassination of Hitler. He would later be arrested, and on April 9th, 1945, he would be hanged. Before he was hanged, he wrote to the Church and said do not label me with the martyrs, because I am not a martyr. He recognized that martyrs died for the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that if he was going to die by hanging, then he had bloody hands. He prayed that as he stood before God on the Day of Judgment that God would deal with him, not on the basis of justice, but on the basis of grace. The doctor who saw Dietrich Bonhoeffer die had been practicing for 50 years, and he said this, "In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

Please understand that we have the right to disobey when our government commands what is forbidden, and forbids what is commanded. But it still doesn't give us the right as individual citizens to ultimately take matters into our own hands. Dietrich Bonhoeffer forgot the example of King David. When King David realized that God had delivered Saul, who was unjustly after him, into his hands and he could easily take his life, he said he would not touch Saul. He recognized that even in all of his unjustness, he did not have the right as a citizen to take the life of King Saul.

We can look at the Netherlands and talk about Cornelia "Corrie" ten Boom; what a story! Living in a society in which Hitler's socialism was spreading

literally around the continent, Corrie ten Boom's dad decided he would disobey and hide, shelter, feed, and clothe persecuted Jews. Corrie ten Boom watched her dad and mother minister to Jewish family after Jewish family. When the Dutch government would make the raids on its citizens looking for Jews, they would start at the ground floor. The last place they would reach would be the attic, and that is where Corrie Ten Boom's bedroom was. They had a special compartment in her room behind a bookcase. A little part of that bookcase would slide open and you would have to kneel down and crawl through a little compartment about thirty inches wide and a few feet long. An alarm was rigged in their house so that when a raid came they would not be caught unaware, and immediately, the Jews who were hidden would be taken upstairs to Corrie's room and they would slide through that bookcase. In 1945, when the Dutch government raided Corrie's home, six Jewish people escaped because they were in the hiding place. Corrie's dad, and Corrie, herself, disobeyed an unjust government.

Let me remind you that Augustine said that an unjust law is no law at all. Thomas Aquinas, the great Church theologian, reminds us how to tell the difference between a just law and an unjust law so that we do not use our own interpretation and we understand that just laws are laws that mirror the law of God and have God at its source. He said that a just law always lifts up the personality of the people being governed, but an unjust law always degrades the personality of those being governed.

Before Disobedience

I don't know if you are aware of this or not, but it was actually the writings of Thomas Aquinas that led Martin Luther King, Jr. to believe that he must (as well as lead others to) disobey Uncle Sam. Some of you lived through, first hand, what is called the civil rights movement in the United States of America. What fueled that civil disobedience was a certain part of society not enforcing what, in 1954, the Supreme Court said was unjust and illegal, and that is the segregation of races in our public school system. I don't know if you've ever read Martin Luther's letter from a Birmingham jail. If you haven't, you are missing out on one of the greatest letters ever written besides those that were authored by the Holy Spirit of God through the writers of the New Testament. I encourage you to read that letter

firsthand. From that letter, I want to give four things that I think we must follow when we, as a church, a citizen, or a Christian, decide to disobey Uncle Sam.

1. Collect the Facts

In this day of internet and mass production of media, please be careful of what you hear our government has done or is going to do. Sometimes the Christian community is the first to act or to speak. But we sometimes speak and act when we should have engaged our mind instead of our mouth. Do you hear me? In America, we are bad about liking the cliff note version of things. We don't like to read the actual document; we don't like to read the actual book. We like to read the short version; we like to read someone else's summary.

Have you ever tried to take a test in college when you didn't read the actual text book, but read the cliff note version, and the teacher had a different perspective than the cliff note version? Please be careful to make sure that when we get ready to act as a church, or as an individual, that we have done our research and we have read the actual document. We should know firsthand what our government says we can do or what our government says we cannot do. We need to read exactly what our government tells us they are going to do before we act.

2. Negotiate

Once we have collected all the information necessary and understand firsthand what is going on, I think we should negotiate. That is exactly what Daniel did with Ashpenaz; he negotiated. Before Daniel ever protested, before he ever picketed, before he ever wrote a letter to the editor, before he ever got on Facebook, he negotiated. He called Ashpenaz in and basically said, *look, you told me we've got to eat this, but I can't eat this. But I'm telling you that if you'll let everybody eat what I'm going to eat, you'll see that our way is better than your way. Let's test it scientifically and see if it's true.* Daniel offered to try it out for ten days, and after the ten day trial was up (talk about a miracle diet), they were better than the other youths! They negotiated.

3. Self-Purification

Now let's suppose we negotiate, but negotiations fail. The third step to civil disobedience after we've collected the facts, after we've negotiated but failed, what we must do is have a time of self-purification. I remember very little about the civil rights movement, but I have studied it and Martin Luther King, Jr. In particular, I have primarily studied him as an orator. He is one of the greatest orators that has ever lived in the United States; he had a way with words. Before Martin Luther King, Jr. ever led anyone to sit down in a diner, they spent months and months, and even years, asking those who were going to participate, "Are you pure?" He believed that the purity of the means had to match the purity of the end. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded that if you are beaten, if you are pushed, if you are shoved, if you are spit at, you do not fight back. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not believe that immoral actions could be used to accomplish moral ends. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught his disciples that when we break a law, the consequences of us breaking the law is that we must incur judgment and we must accept the judgment that is given to us. And when it comes, if you can't accept that, you are not to be in this movement.

That is exactly the attitude Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had. When they didn't bow down, they knew the consequences of not bowing down. It was not to fight back, but to die in that fiery furnace because they broke the law. The apostles knew when they were commanded not to preach that the result of preaching would be that they would be thrown in jail. So when they were thrown in jail, they didn't have a 'woe is me' pity-party, or 'where is God' moment. They faced the consequences because they had been through the process of self-purification. They understood why they were doing what they were doing, and they were going to do what they did justly, in the face of an unjust action for an unjust law.

4. Direct Action

And lastly, there will come a time when the Church, and Christians, will have to have direct action. But please remember, we cannot ever adopt any immoral actions to accomplish moral ends. Even in being disobedient to our government, we must make sure we are obedient to our God and follow the example of Jesus Christ in our attitude and in our actions. In

Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther, King Jr. was placed in jail. He and his friend were separated and put in solitary confinement, and they were not given their rights to a phone call. When he did not come home, his wife made a call to the White House. Her call was returned by a man named Robert, who told her that his brother will be calling shortly, and John F. Kennedy made that call to Mrs. King. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a Birmingham jail, caused John F. Kennedy to get off the fence. I think we all understand that we were wrong in our segregation policy.

There may be a time in the future when, as a church or a Christian, we have to disobey Uncle Sam. And if we do, we must disobey with the spirit of obedience because we are subject to a higher authority than ourselves, and that authority is God. We have to understand that there will be consequences and we must be willing to accept them. As Christians, we should be the best citizens in this country.