

A Few Comments About Civil Disobedience

NOTE: The focus of this article is on one's relationship to civil authorities. However, the principles given are applicable to *any* situation in which one person is under another person's authority.

It is important to realize that all legitimate authority structures share a common feature: Each is a reflection of the *basic principle* expressed in the command: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12a). This being the case, the way we respond to authority is a very serious matter.

1. We have an obligation to submit to legitimate authorities that have been placed over us.

- Romans 13:1-8; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 2:13-17

2. If, at any time, a human authority tries to get us to do something that goes against God (the ultimate authority over all other authorities), it is our obligation to disobey the human authority and to obey God.

- Acts 5:29; 1 Peter 3:14-17; Matthew 10:28; Acts 4:19-20

3. If we must disobey a human authority, for the sake of obedience to God, we must maintain the proper attitude of respect and honor for that human authority. We must also willingly submit to whatever consequences we receive because of our disobedience (including punishment, though unjust).

- 1 Peter 2:19-23 (Jesus' example); 1 Peter 4:12-16, 19
- In addition to Jesus' example, we also have the example of many godly people. One example is seen in Jeremiah 26:11-15, which shows us how Jeremiah reacted, when he was threatened with death. (The threat was later withdrawn.) Many other passages are marked by their *absence* of abusive or disrespectful speech and conduct. For example, Daniel 3:16-18 shows us the response of Daniel's three friends, when faced with death. (They were willing to stand for the truth, but while doing so, they DIDN'T say anything disrespectful.)

4. In all things, we must maintain a godly attitude. Also, we must not try to take matters into our own hands (seeking retaliation, for instance). Rather, we must commit the situation to him who is the final Judge of all.

- Romans 12:17-21; 1 Peter 2:21-23
 - Our proper attitude: Luke 6:27-31; Matthew 5:43-48; Matthew 22:37-40
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A Few Additional Comments about One's Attitude Toward Authority:

In the Old Testament., prophets had authority over kings. They could confront kings and speak to them in ways that nobody else would have dared. They had authority to give commands to kings (commands they received from God), and if necessary, even to condemn them (based on the king's response to God's Word). Yet we see, in Jeremiah, a person who was willing to maintain a godly attitude, even when his life was being threatened by people who were lower in authority than he was.

Even greater was the authority that Jesus had - the one who is Lord over all creation. When he was being tortured and crucified by people who were *much* lower in authority, he also maintained a godly attitude. He could have uttered threats and made many vengeful remarks to those who were doing this to him (compare with 1 Peter 2:22-23a). He could have easily sent an army of angels to destroy them all (Matthew 26:53-54). By just uttering the word, he could have come down off the cross and saved himself (compare with Luke 23:37). But love kept him on the cross. He chose rather to say, "Father forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

We need to consider these things, when we are choosing our own response to unjust suffering caused by others (Matthew 5:38-42; Luke 6:27-31).

BEFORE YOU CHOOSE TO DISOBEY...

1) Make sure that the things you plan to do are truly what GOD says you must do.

- It's easy for a person to tear a verse out of context, to justify his own interests. People have even KILLED innocent people, thinking that doing so pleased God (John 16:2)!

2) Make sure that your "values" are not upside-down.

- A New Testament example of upside-down values is this: The religious leaders were zealous for even the tiniest matters of the law - such as parts of the sacrificial system and ceremonial rituals, etc. But they had little concern for the things God considered *more* important - such as justice and mercy (Matthew 23:23-24).
- Another example is found in the parable of the "Good Samaritan": Two of the travelers had their values upside down, and considered their religious activities as more important than helping the injured person (Luke 10:30-37).
- In contrast is the example of Abigail, wife of Nabal. Nabal's values were upside-down and Abigail's values were correct. [Note that, in the original Hebrew language, the name "Nabal" means (rather appropriately) "fool"! (1 Samuel 25:25)] She gave provisions to David's men, though Nabal refused to do so. If Abigail had *not* done so, it would have been the same as choosing to permit the death of many. And to allow this to happen - even though allowed in a passive manner (compare to James 4:17) - would have been a violation of a higher (God's) authority. [See the account in 1 Samuel 25.]

3) Make sure that you have a godly attitude.

- This includes having the type of love God requires you to have, for the person you are about to disobey. (See Matthew 5:43-48 and 1 Corinthians 13) [People find it more natural to associate disobedience with anger and hate, rather than with love. But God calls us to act differently.]

OTHERWISE - if you have not met the above requirements:

1) You will deserve any punishment you may get. (1 Peter 2:20a)

2) If people associate your actions with your "faith," *you* may become guilty of driving them away from the truth. People may end-up cursing God, instead of turning to him, because of your sin. (Compare to Romans 2:24.)

3) Ultimately, you will have to give account to God for your actions. Then, at the Day of Justice, everyone will know that your actions did *not* have his approval.