

Suffer for Righteousness Sake

By Jim Davis

In the previous two articles we considered the Scriptural principles of submission to authority and the Scriptural principles for the exercise of authority. Authority is power that is delegated from God to men and angels. It does not involve equality but it does involve roles or rank. Those who are given authority are held responsible for the manner in which they exercise it. God gives it to mankind for our protection and well-being but authorities often abuse power. Since we are clearly commanded to submit and obey our authorities, what do we do when those in places of leadership abuse power? When do we take a stand against those who are higher in rank than we are? And when, if ever, do we disobey?

When do we disobey authority?

This was a hot issue in Jesus' day also. In the gospels (Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26) we read about the religious Pharisees teaming up with another sect called the Herodians to entrap Jesus in His words. He was asked the question, "Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" In 6 AD there had been a tax revolt against the Romans. Although the revolt was crushed, a sect of rebels called the Zealots had been formed. One of Christ's disciples was called Simon the Zealot and no doubt the religious leaders saw the potential for conflict with the Roman authority. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah and a few days earlier had made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Instead of removing the Romans He had purged the Temple of the moneychangers. In Luke 20:20 the Bible says, "and they watched Him and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement, so as to deliver Him up to the rule and the authority of the governor." They were looking for an area of rebellion or disobedience to authority in Jesus but they could not find it.

I think that Jesus' statement should be the standard by which we determine our response to authority. After He had directed their attention to the image and inscription on the coin He said to them, "then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25). ***The only time we should disobey authority is when we are required to sin unless we do so.*** The limitation is very narrow. It does not include doing things that we perceive in our judgment to be good if it conflicts with the commands of our superiors.

If we disobey it should be because we are determined to render to God the things that are God's. We should be willing if necessary to suffer for the privilege of doing what is right. The Scripture says, "By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God" (1 Peter 4:15-16). We are blessed if we are persecuted for righteousness sake (Matthew 5:10-12). The lesson that we find in the Bible is that if you rebel from authority you will be destroyed. If you stand against authority and suffer for righteousness sake it will cost you dearly but it will be worth it from the eternal standpoint.

Biblical Examples

In the Bible we find very few positive examples of disobedience to authority. I would place the examples in two categories. The first category is examples of those who oppose

superiors by confronting them with their personal sin. These examples involve opposition to leaders but may not necessarily involve disobedience. The second set of examples involves disobedience to a direct command or commands of superiors.

There are several ***examples of opposition to leaders but no disobedience to their commands***. These examples involve prophets of priests opposing rulers. The prophet Nathan opposed King David and called him to accountability for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 12). When King Uzziah intruded into the priestly duties of the Temple in Jerusalem the priests opposed him (2 Chronicles 26:17-18). In the New Testament we find John the Baptist reproving Herod Antipas the ruler over Galilee because of his unlawful marriage to his brother's wife and for all the other wicked things that Herod had done (Luke 3:19).

There are other examples but I would like to make two observations here. In each of these instances those who opposed the political leaders were men who were given special authority and special calling. This qualification would exclude most of us. The other observation is that those who opposed the rulers were often persecuted and sometimes lost their lives as a result of their stand. Such was the case with John the Baptist who was first imprisoned and later beheaded.

The principle to learn here is that when we oppose superiors for righteousness sake we should realize that the consequences can be very serious. If our superiors respond properly it will be of tremendous benefit to the cause of Christ. If they respond improperly it will still be of tremendous benefit to the cause of Christ because of your testimony to righteousness. Count the cost in light of eternity.

There are very few ***examples of opposition to leaders involving direct disobedience to their commands***. But they do exist and we should carefully consider them. In the Old Testament we find the prophet Daniel praying and worshiping God in direct disobedience to an edict signed into law by the Medo-Persian King Darius (Daniel 6:10). You will remember that he was thrown into the lion's den but delivered by God. Another example in the Old Testament is the incident in which Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego refused to obey the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's decree to fall down and worship a golden image (Daniel 3:12). God delivered them from execution in a furnace of fire. In the New Testament book of Acts Peter and John were commanded not to speak or teach in the name of Christ (Acts 4:18). Their response was that it is better to obey God than men.

The question of when we should disobey God-ordained human authority is clear from the teaching in the Bible: only when to obey them it becomes necessary to disobey God. When we are faced with the choice of whether to obey men or God we should always choose to obey God. But we must understand that suffering for righteousness sake can be very costly. That brings us to the decision as to whether it is worth it or not. The Bible teaches that every stand that we take for truth and righteousness will indeed be worth it in light of eternity.

Conclusion

When do we take a stand against our superiors, and when, if ever, do we disobey them? The answer to the question is summed up in the statement that Jesus made to the religious leaders of His day. Render to the rulers what is due to rulers and to God what is God's. There is rank and order here that will keep us in check when it becomes necessary. Disobey your human authority only when it becomes necessary in order to obey God. Otherwise, we are to submit.

In light of the principles we have learned from God's word, what do you think Christian people should do when the Supreme Court rules that we cannot pray at school functions? What are Christian teachers supposed to do when they are told they cannot speak of God in the public school classrooms or post the Ten Commandments? What does the young person do when he feels that God is calling him to the ministry and his parents are adamantly opposed to his going? What does a wife do when her husband commands her not to go to church? In part 2 of this article next month I would like to consider some of the contemporary conflicts we may face when we desire to obey God's word and submit to authority. I would also like to suggest some Scriptural principles regarding steps of action that may be taken to avoid conflicts that may result in the need to disobey human authority for righteousness sake.