

PART SEVEN
GOVERNMENT
& POLITICS



STEWARDSHIP

MAXIMIZING GOD'S BLESSINGS FOR HIS GLORY
& OUR BENEFIT

We can now return to our question from last week. “Was Bonhoeffer disobeying Romans 13 in participating in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.” In case you did not know, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany who was eventually executed for his involvement in this plot just a few days before the end of WW2.

This question is really quite the conundrum. We want to be able to answer “No-Bonhoeffer was not disobedient,” since we all know Hitler is in competition for the most evil person in human history. But we also know the truth of Romans 13 and that Bonhoeffer was not a military man fighting a war. He was a private citizen attempting to assassinate his president, whom Romans 13 says that God appointed. The last two weeks I have tried to establish the clear teaching in Romans 13, that we are to submit to the God-ordained governing authorities. But this morning we finally get to the question of civil disobedience. Let’s read the passage again before we dig in.

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. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 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, 4 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. 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 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.

First I want to show multiple places in the Bible where people practiced what could be called civil disobedience.

When he was still a teenager, Daniel did not obey the king's order to eat the royal food. Instead, he suggested to the attendant that he and his friends eat only vegetables and God blessed his obedience. In a much more serious matter, Daniel refused to obey the command to only pray to King Darius. Daniel's defiance is direct and courageous.

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. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously (Daniel 6:10).

As a result of his civil disobedience, he was thrown into the pit of lions. And once again God vindicated him and rescued Daniel. Daniel illustrates our first principle.

1. Civil disobedience must be in response to explicit teaching in the Scriptures.

Daniel refused to pray to the king. To do so would have been blasphemy of the highest order. This principle will not get you out of paying taxes. People argue that much of their tax dollars pays for things that are forbidden in Scripture. For example, abortions are paid for by some tax dollars. This won't work as an excuse though, because Jesus and Paul both paid taxes even though the Roman government was involved in all manner of evil acts. I will refuse to perform a wedding service for a gay or lesbian couple. That may one day get me in trouble but I would be making that decision in response to explicit teaching in the Scriptures.

In the same book, we have three more courageous men. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this 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 that you have set up" (Daniel 3:16-18)*

2. You must be willing to accept the consequences of your actions.

This is a classic and helpful example as we also see their willingness, not only to disobey the governing authorities, but also their willingness to accept the consequences for their actions. "But if not..." If you ever do decide to practice civil disobedience, accepting the consequences is a necessary part of your decision process. This is true in all of life and it is no less true in serious decisions such as these.

The Bible is also filled with courageous women.

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, 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 (Exodus 1:15-18).

3. Civil disobedience must be motivated by a reverent fear of God.

I love this example as it allows us to peer into the hearts of the women. "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them." We might want to disobey law because it makes us angry. We might want to disobey for a variety of selfish or prideful reasons but those are all the wrong reasons. Fearing God and loving his word are necessary for civil disobedience.

4. Civil disobedience must be done for the common good.

Queen Esther illustrates our next principle.

Esther 4.16- *“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”*

Though this was not civil disobedience per se-technically she was allowed to enter the king’s chamber uninvited-but he could just as easily lop off her head for doing so. But Esther was courageous for the common good. Her motives were not the least bit selfish.

This was also true with Obadiah who defied the evil queen Jezebel. *Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, 4 and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water (1 Kings 18:4-5).* Obadiah risked his life and disobeyed the authorities for the common good, to protect the innocent and those who needed protection.

Men who also fit into this category start to open up an interesting can of worms.

Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah are all listed in Hebrews 11 as “heroes of faith.” However, they were all involved in overthrowing oppressive governments. That’s a bit troublesome. I hesitate to make this into a hard and fast principle like “if you overthrow an oppressive government God will call you faithful.” There is no question that God ordained and empowered their military campaigns. But the one thing they had that we don’t was a direct command from God to enter into battle with the enemy.

Then when we move to the New Testament we see multiple examples of civil disobedience. When Peter stood up to the Sanhedrin and boldly declared, “We must obey God rather than men,” the decision was an obvious one. The Sanhedrin had commanded them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus which was not possible for the apostles. Paul received multiple beatings and imprisonments for his bold preaching to he obviously did not always submit to the governing authorities, whether they were religious authorities or civil authorities.

The apostles met all of these principles. They followed the clear teaching of Scripture, they feared God, they were willing to accept the consequences and they acted unselfishly, for the common good. These are all clear principles from a large sampling of Old and New Testament passages. But you might be surprised to see some principles of civil disobedience contained within Romans 13 itself.

5. All governing authorities are appointed by God but not everything they do is approved by God.

There is no argument that God established all governing authorities. You cannot wiggle out of that truth. However, as I said in the first message on this topic, all governments do evil to some extent. Just because the overall governing authority is established by God does not mean that God approves everything they do. In some cases, God would be directly against almost every decision of a government.

Governing authorities are *the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer*. However, God cannot ordain evil acts. If the governing authorities kill me for preaching the gospel, this is NOT God's wrath on me given through the governing authorities. This is government gone wrong.

6. God intends government for your good-to promote justice and goodness and to punish evil.

This entire passage supports government as an institution for the good of its people. They are to support morality and justice. They are to punish the bad and reward the good. But if they do not do these things, then we cannot support their evil actions. It becomes not just our right but our responsibility to oppose them.

7. God, not governments, decide what is good and what is evil.

This goes hand in hand with principle six. The government can pass laws but the government cannot determine right from wrong. Only God can do this. Isaiah 5:20 says "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil." Governing authorities frequently call evil good and good evil. Abortion and gay marriage are two relevant, in your face examples of this. Just because our president praises the courage of a transgendered Olympic athlete, does make it right. Bruce Jenner is a sick man and the president of the United States should not be praising this sickness and sin.

8. We should use laws for our own advantage.

Even though Paul often disobeyed the governing authorities, he also used the laws for his own advantage.

The tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. 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?" (Acts 22:24-25).

But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar" (Acts 25:10-11).

Someone gave me an article last week with this quote. "While we may be beyond the time for the ballot box, and it may not yet be time for the cartridge box, we must continue using the soap box, and we must start using the jury box."¹ In this person's opinion, the ballot box is a useless endeavor. I agree that our vote seems to count for little at times but if every Christian gives up their right to cast a ballot, what good will that do? Even in the midst of a corrupt Roman Empire, Paul still appealed for justice.

This writer also stated that is not yet time for the cartridge box. It's not yet time to take up arms and I would most certainly agree. But as we are now less than a month away from the celebration of our nation's independence, and since country was founded precisely because we took up arms in the Revolution, was this Biblically justified or were our founding fathers just a bunch of

treasonous criminals? In other words, how do we apply all of the principles from the last three messages?

Let me read to you an important document written one year prior to the Declaration of Independence.

“We have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great Britain and establishing independent states. We fight not for glory or for conquest. We exhibit to Mankind the remarkable Spectacle of a People attacked by unprovoked Enemies, without any Imputation, or even Suspicions of Offence. They boast of their Privileges and Civilization, and yet proffer no milder Conditions than Servitude or Death.

In our own native Land, in Defence of the Freedom that is our Birthright, and which we ever enjoyed till the late Violation of it—for the Protection of our Property, acquired solely by the honest Industry of our Fore-Fathers and ourselves, against Violence actually offered, we have taken up Arms. We shall lay them down when Hostilities shall cease on the Part of the Agressors, and all Danger.

With an humble Confidence in the Mercies the supreme and impartial Judge and Ruler of the Universe, we most devoutly implore his divine Goodness to conduct us happily through this great Conflict, to dispose our Adversaries to Reconciliation on reasonable Terms, and thereby to relieve the Empire from the Calamities of civil War.²

This is a powerful summary of what is called the Just War Theory. I don't intend to delve deeply into these principals but here they are in summary.

1. Just Cause
2. Right Authority
3. Proportionality
4. The Goal of Peace
5. War as the Last Resort

Our founding fathers fully believed that they were fulfilling the principals of a just war. Some of them were deists and many were true believers but all of them considered their actions and decisions at the deepest possible level. Here is a helpful quote.

“The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars, when they find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs, that right conduct requires them to act, or to make others act in this way.”³

If you took the time to do so, I think we could take all of the principles from the last three messages on Romans 13 and they would not contradict the principles of Just War. Now we must also recognize that Just War is a theory and that many supposed applications of it have been

wrong. In theory, you can have a just war, but you must be oh so careful. In theory you can practice civil disobedience, but you must be oh so careful.

So back to our original question. Was Bonhoeffer disobeying Romans 13 by engaging in a plot to assassinate Hitler? This has to be one of the trickiest applications of these principles. Do you really want me to answer this question? Here's my answer. I don't know. In theory, I believe that Bonhoeffer's actions could fit under the category of a Just War. I assume that Bonhoeffer sweat blood and tears in praying over this decision. He was certainly willing and did experience the consequence of his actions, failed as they were. But I could never say categorically yes or no to this question because there is no way for me to know Bonhoeffer's heart. And like most of the Christian life, it can be simple to follow a human law or a command from God and still have a twisted, prideful heart. We do it every day. So in all of these things, we need to seek the Lord, seek his Word all the while we discern our own hearts. Plus, most of us will never be faced with such a decision.

Let me close with something that is much more relevant. All of my life I have heard Christians say this: You can't legislate morality. They use this as an excuse for disengaging in their right and responsibilities as both U.S. citizens and as God honoring believers. For example, some Christians think it is a waste of time to fight for pro-life issues because even if we pass the right laws, human hearts may not be changed. True enough. But as I have said before, I am unapologetically a single issue voter. Pro-life policy is my swing vote every time. Now that is not to say that I will vote for a candidate just because he is pro-life. I seek to cast my vote for the very best pro-life candidate. But when it comes right down to it, if I have a choice between a goofball who is pro-life and a goofball who is pro-abortion, I will choose the pro-life person every time.

If you hold to this idea that you can't legislate morality, I hope that this quote from Martin Luther King may help to persuade you otherwise.

Now the other myth that gets around is the idea that legislation cannot really solve the problem and that it has no great role to play in this period of social change because you've got to change the heart and you can't change the heart through legislation. You can't legislate morals. The job must be done through education and religion.

Well, there's half-truth involved here.

Certainly, if the problem is to be solved then in the final sense, hearts must be changed. Religion and education must play a great role in changing the heart.

But we must go on to say that while it may be true that morality cannot be legislated, behavior can be regulated.

It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless.

It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can keep him from lynching me and I think that is pretty important, also.⁴

All laws legislate morality. The law against murder is a moral law that happens to agree with God's law. The law supporting gay marriage is intended to legislate morality. Man calls it moral

but God declares it to be immoral. So all laws legislate morality and the only question that remains is “whose morality will be legislated—man’s or God’s?” By whatever means we employ, the choice is up to you and me.

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¹ http://www.thedailysheep.com/the-danger-that-there-will-be-no-big-event_052015

² Declaration on Taking Arms, By Order of CONGRESS, JOHN HANCOCK, President. Attested, CHARLES THOMPSON Secretary. PHILADELPHIA, July 6th, 1775.

³ Arthur F. Holmes, ed., War and Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 64.

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr.’s [address at Western Michigan University](#), December 18, 1963.