**Truth Currents** **7-17-20**

This week I want to talk to you about government, about the Bible, about what Christians do in our generation. I have had a number of people in my sphere of influence ask about the recent Tulsa City Ordinance mandating masks in public places. How will that affect the worship of the people of Evergreen? First of all, Evergreen is a Broken Arrow church, so the Tulsa ordinance doesn’t actually have authority in our case. But as we move forward we will do our best to be good neighbors. And so, beginning this coming Sunday, we will provide a socially distanced setup in our auditorium for both of our worship services. Whether you come at 9:00 or whether you come at 11:00, you will be able to have the comfort of being socially distanced. And you will find that setup when you arrive. Just make your way to the available seats. We have the capacity to do that. So, whether your chosen strategy in this pandemic, that’s hopefully winding down in the coming weeks, is wearing a mask or being physically distanced, Evergreen will be a place for you. And you can find whatever strategy you’re comfortable with.

I want to talk to you about an extreme case. Obviously, Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma has not gone this far yet. But you may have heard the news recently that the state of California started by prohibiting singing in church worship services. They have now followed that up with an Executive Order from the governor that churches like museums, restaurants, gymnasiums, movie theaters, churches are included in an order to shut down and take a step back and not have any in-person activities.

I’ve been asked about that at a number of times and I’ve just left it to private conversations. But this week I finally had someone come to me and say, “How can you be against the state of California closing churches when **Romans 13** tells us to be subject to ruling authorities over us?” Well, that was the trigger for me because the Bible “*doesn’t mean what it says, it means what it means*.”

So, I want you to go with me to **Romans 13** today. And I want talk to you about what Paul means in this passage. And I want to put **Romans 13** in the context of what the Bible has to say about civil disobedience.

In **Romans 13,** the first five verses this is what the Apostle Paul writes:

“Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.”

What I want to talk to you about today is the fact that this passage is used and has been used throughout church history to justify conformity to some outrageous government edicts in differing generations.

Paul tells us in summary in these verses that the governing authorities are “*appointed by God*” therefore to oppose them is to oppose God and to incur punishment. “*Do not oppose them*,” he says but “*be subject to them*.”

Now, here’s the thing. We have to ask how **Romans 13** fits in with the rest of the Bible. Because frankly as we work through the Word of God, what we find is a long and illustrious history of what is called “civil disobedience.” In fact, as we’ve gone through the life of Moses on Sundays in our church, one of the things that we saw just a matter of a few weeks ago was really one of the first great examples of civil disobedience is at the birth of Moses when Pharaoh said that “*all male Hebrew babies were to be killed*.” The story tells us that the mid-wives who were delivering babies among the people of Israel refused to abide by that order and helped babies be born and then be hidden. In fact, the story of Moses is the story of him being “*secretly*” protected by his parents. And it tells us in **Exodus 1** that God was “*pleased*” with the mid-wives and He “*dealt with them favorably*.” In fact, it says that He “*gave them their own children.*” Well, clearly God was not disappointed with them. In fact, He was “pleased” with the mid-wives as they clearly disobeyed the civil authorities of their day.

We go to the book of Daniel and we find two clear examples. In **Daniel 3** we have Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to worship King Nebuchadnezzar and they were thrown into a fiery furnace. We know how that turned out. God miraculously protected them and restored them to favor.

We go on to **Daniel** **6** and we find Daniel, one of the top three ranking officials in the entire empire, and yet because of his faith he was charged with crimes against the state and thrown into a lion’s den. Again, God clearly shows favor with Daniel’s disobedience to the state by protecting him from the lions.

A situation that’s more clearly on point with where we are today, is in the 4th chapter of Acts when Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish authorities and commanded not to “*speak or teach in the name of Jesus*.” In **Acts 4:19** they said,

“Whether it’s right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

They were released. They went back about their business sharing the gospel and telling people about Jesus so much so that they were arrested a second time. And in **Acts 5:28** the religious authorities said,

“we strictly charged you not to teach in this name? Yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”

This flows out of a principle that Jesus gave when asked a tricky question about taxes. And He laid down a principle that says, “*render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but only give to God the things that only belong to God.*”

The implication of the principle is that submission to government authority is not an absolute in the lives of a believer. What is absolute is that our loyalty to God, our faithfulness and obedience to God’s commands cannot be compromised no matter what civil government tells us to do.

In **John 19:10**, Jesus was standing before Pilate during one of His series of trials the night before the cross. And Pilate said to Jesus,

“Do you not know that I have authority to release you and the authority to crucify you?”

And Jesus answered,

“You would have no authority over me at all, unless it had been given you from above.”

You see, Paul and Jesus are in agreement that all governmental authority is put into place by God. That is, for God’s purposes He puts men, women, governments in power. The fact that God ordains authority does not necessarily mean that all authority is to be obeyed by God’s people.

Let’s go back to **Romans 13** because where the crux of this matter is that verse 3 has to be qualified. It says,

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval.”

Paul is writing about government in an ideal sense. He’s writing about government who does what it’s supposed to do. Government is supposed to protect and promote the good and the healthy. Government is supposed to prevent and limit what is bad and unhealthy. In that scenario where government is functioning as government was intended to function, submission to the government and obedience to the commands of God will never be in conflict.

The problem is that in modern life and really throughout two thousand years of church history, governments seldom are completely good. They’re usually not completely bad. They’re typically a little bit of both. And it is the moral authority of the Church to speak about that so that government is commended when they fulfill their God ordained purpose and protect the good and punish the evil, when they provide law and establish order. The Church is to act independently of government as they follow the commands of God when the government is functioning in a way that compromises its authority. That is, when they criticize, when they harm the good and when they celebrate the bad.

As long as authorities punish what is evil and praise what is good, our submission to the authorities and our obedience to God will never conflict. But if the authorities ever begin to punish the good and reward the bad then we have a Biblical situation that requires our loyalty to be to God alone.

In **1 Peter 4:15,16,** Peter says this, “*Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a wrong doer, or a mischief maker*.” He says obey the laws. Don’t be a criminal. “*But if one of you suffers as a Christian*,” that is if you suffer for doing what God has commanded us to do, like attending church, “*let him not be ashamed but under that name let him glorify God*.” In other words, strive to avoid incurring the wrath of government for doing wrong. But if doing what Christ demands brings government wrath then don’t have a guilty conscience. Use it to glorify God.

Here’s my summary. There is no authority except from God. The greatest human ruler should humbly confess that he is where he is by the sovereign appointment of the One True God.

Secondly, some rules and governments are good. Some are bad. Some reward the right and punish the wrong. Others do the reverse. Most governments do a little bit of both. Therefore, the demand for subjection is relative not absolute. It depends on whether the demands of the governing authorities require us to disobey Jesus. If they do, we will not be subject to that point but we will say with Peter that we’ve got to obey God rather than men. Now understand, it’s not that we can disobey laws that we don’t like. But we are charged to disobey laws that compromise the commands of God that have priority in our lives.

It is very important to stress that just as we might disobey the civil authorities in the name of Christ, we also obey the civil authorities as much as we can. Also, because we are representatives of Jesus Christ. Every time we say yes to a law we are in effect saying yes to Jesus. We only say no to a law when it requires us to say no to Jesus. If Jesus is that much with us, then we will know the difference between a law that might make us unhappy or uncomfortable versus a law that will make us compromise our loyalty to Christ.

We have seen in this country in recent months unprecedented maleficence on the part of our government. We have seen forced economic lockdowns that have questionable impact on the public health crisis that we are being told is sweeping the nation. On top of the economic lockdown, we’ve seen a failure to protect the innocent both in life and property as local and state governments in a variety of places have actually asked their law enforcement officers to step down. They have refused help to bring law and order. And they have allowed riots to be rampant in our streets.

When a government hurts the good and supports the bad, we are obligated as the people of God to stand in a place that refuses to obey. When the state of California says churches must shut their doors and they cannot meet, that is the hill upon which we die. We will give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But we will not give to him what belongs to God.

We as Christians will obey as long as we can and as well as we are able. But mark these words. Our obedience to government is not absolute and it will not be allowed to compromise our loyalty and obedience to Christ Jesus.

This is Truth Currents. Stay tuned.