

# **A Biblical Perspective of Self-Defense and Civil Disobedience**

## **Part Two – Civil Disobedience**

### **Introduction**

As we see major changes in our nation and the world in this post-Christian era, many Christians have questions and express concern about what is happening. Much of this relates to the believer's loyalty to government in an increasingly corrupt world, especially whether believers should ever disobey the government.

God Himself set the pattern for human authorities governing a populace and penalizing those who break the law. Yet the church was founded by a man whom the authorities considered a criminal. Christians will not fulfill their roles in life without coming into conflict with the world system.

There are many examples of civil disobedience in the Old Testament and some of them give insight to God's expectations of His people. But our covenant has significantly different standards for behavior and motivation, so we will consider primarily Scriptures in the New Testament.

### **Submission to Authority**

During the New Testament period, Israel was under Roman military occupation. The Roman government appointed governors over the occupied territories, and Pilate was governor of Israel. The governor handled matters of civil law, including any crime worthy of the death penalty. Rome allowed the Jewish Sanhedrin to continue functioning as a religious governing body and court. So Jesus and the apostles had two distinct authorities over them: the Roman civil government with its army and local governor; and the religious system, including the Sanhedrin, Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious leaders. In that context, let us examine what Jesus and the apostles said about submitting to authority.

Jesus often sat and taught people who would gather around. One day while He was teaching, He said the following to the crowd and His disciples. "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matt. 23:1-3). It would be easy to interpret this passage to mean Jesus' followers must do whatever the religious leaders say, but that is not His point. He acknowledged the scribes (teachers of the law) and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat, meaning it was their responsibility to interpret Scripture, so people must obey their teaching from the Scripture because it was the Word of God. He charged the religious leaders of having a double standard, because they personally did not do what they taught, so His followers should not copy their behavior. This appears to be the only statement He made about obeying the religious leaders, and he's actually saying people should do and observe what the leaders teach from Scripture. He is not advocating unconditional obedience to the religious leaders; as we'll see later, He clearly did not do that Himself.

Romans 13:1-7 is one of the passages most frequently used to make a case for unconditional submission to authorities, so let us consider it in detail. Paul wrote his letter to the believers in Rome during the early years of Nero's rule, which were years of relative peace

before persecution broke out.

This passage begins, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1). The word translated “submit” (*hypotasso*) has a range of meanings. Based on the grammatical form used, this verse is a command to be subject to the governing authorities.

Paul continued, “there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted” (Rom. 13:1-2). God established all existing authorities, so submitting to them acknowledges the legitimacy they derive from God and their divine commission to reward good and punish evil. This does not mean our obedience must be unconditional, however. If an authority violates God’s laws or commands others to do so, it has violated its God-given commission and that action is illegitimate. Only God’s authority is absolute and all other authority is delegated. Jesus recognized this when interrogated by Pilate: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11). So obedience to a human authority is obedience to the authority God delegated. To rebel against legitimately exercised authority is to rebel against God.

Does this apply to abusive, tyrannical governments? To harmful or foolish laws? We must recognize that the authority of human government ultimately lies in the hands of God. Nothing and no one is beyond God’s sovereign control.

With regard to laws, some might argue there is no scriptural precedent for opposing an existing law. While that may be true, we need to consider the biblical context. The absence of a scriptural precedent may not prohibit legitimate opposition in today’s American system, for example. The Old Testament law set up a theocracy and God made the laws; there was no chance for humans to change those laws. In the New Testament, virtually everywhere the believers went was territory conquered by Rome; there was no chance for changing those laws, either. At the highest level, we are governed by God’s laws, which clearly are beyond our influence. In America, we have a representative government and it is our civil right to influence our representatives. So opposing or trying to change existing laws is not a problem for us. As long as a law is in effect, however, we are obligated to obey it or experience the consequences for violating it.

Back to the Book of Romans and submission to authority. “Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Rom. 13:2). Rebelling against authority involves rejecting God-given authority and refusing to honor it. This inevitably brings judgment on the rebel; this is God’s system and He guarantees judgment will occur.

“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:3-4).

The purpose of authority is to do good to those who do right and bring punishment on the wrongdoer. From this we can conclude a main purpose of government is to protect the welfare of its citizens. This is a good job profile to keep in mind if you are in any position of authority.

Authority carries the sword for a reason. The sword is an instrument used to inflict major injury and death; it is not just a symbol. The sword represents the government’s right (even responsibility) to use force to maintain the public good. Failure to use appropriate force in society

leads to problems: “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong” (Eccles. 8:11). Regardless of popular beliefs in our society, proper use of force serves as a deterrent to many potential lawbreakers. Punitive force is also a proper response to lawbreakers, because a ruler is God’s servant, an agent of God’s wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. God told Israel to put people to death by stoning for specific crimes, so “all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again” (Deut. 13:11). Authorities must have and use force because, regrettably, there are people who will not obey the law voluntarily. Because government’s primary function is to protect the welfare of its citizens, the primary use of force must be to protect its citizens from whatever might harm them. Therefore military action or severe punishment of lawbreakers would be appropriate uses of force if the result was the protection of the citizens.

“Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience” (Rom. 13:5). Why the reference to conscience? We obey civil authorities because it is the right thing to do and it conforms to God’s purpose, therefore our consciences remain clear. Our obedience to civil authority is to be motivated by our love and devotion to God. A non-Christian may obey civil authority to avoid punishment, or even because he recognizes the need for such authority. But as believers in the Lord, we acknowledge that God Himself stands behind the power and authority of civil government. By submitting to human government, we submit to the system He created.

“This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Rom. 13:6-7). We are to give human government what it deserves—taxes, revenue, respect, honor. Human government is God’s system for administering justice, and as such deserves our support. Among other things, this means we are to respect and honor the person in the position of authority regardless of their personal righteousness. Don’t rebel against the system. Even if you must disobey an unjust command or law, you must still honor the person and position.

Even unjust authorities are God’s servants. This obviously does not mean God endorses everything they do, but it does mean they have the authority to punish those who disobey them or the laws they represent. This is an important point, so let me offer an extreme example. If your government passed a law that required you to violate your religious convictions based on your understanding of the Bible, it is appropriate for the government to punish you if you disobey that law. In that context, submitting yourself to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1) means accepting the punishment for disobeying their law.

Because Romans 13:1-7 is such a definitive passage, we’ll restate the key points. Submit to governing authorities; don’t rebel (that is, don’t reject authority); do what is right; respect and honor those in authority. If you disobey the authorities or the law they represent, you can expect to be punished. Rebelling is refusing to submit to authority, rejecting their right to enforce the law or impose punishment. Submitting involves doing what is expected or accepting the consequences. It is possible to disobey without rebelling, simply by accepting the consequences of your disobedience. You can give authorities your respect and even honor them, yet refuse to do what they demand.

Slavery was a common practice in the first century, and several Scriptures address the slave’s obedience to his master. There were many forms and causes of slavery, including people selling themselves into slavery to pay off a debt to a creditor. Although we do not condone

slavery in America today, these verses are relevant in the context of employees obeying their supervisors.

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free” (Eph. 6:5-8).

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism” (Col. 3:22-25).

“All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God’s name and our teaching may not be slandered” (1 Tim. 6:1).

“Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh” (1 Pet. 2:18).

You realize, of course, there were no safeguards for slaves; they were their masters’ property and had no rights. So in most cases they did exactly what their masters wanted and in some cases were abused at their masters’ whims. Yet they were to obey their masters with full respect, with sincerity of heart, wholeheartedly and as if they were serving the Lord, regardless of how their masters treated them. This is not to suggest that free Christians under government authority are virtually slaves. Rather it shows the type of attitude and behavior the Lord expects even of those under oppressive authorities.

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). This was written about AD 65, as intense government-sanctioned persecution was breaking out against Christians in Rome, after Nero blamed the Christians for the fire that destroyed half of Rome in AD 64. The following was written about the same time.

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men” (Titus 3:1-2). Paul had already spent about two years in a Roman prison and was released a few years before he wrote this. Was the Roman government based on God’s law as given in the Bible? Not at all. Nero certainly was not a God-fearing man, yet Paul’s instructions to submit to the government were given in that anti-Christian context and included no conditions. Some would claim today that a government based on non-Christian or even anti-Christian principles forfeits its right to command obedience from its citizens. But the Roman government Paul lived under was at least as humanistic and wicked as any that exists today, and Paul expected believers to submit to it.

The Book of Hebrews was written about two years later, as persecution was increasing against Christians in Rome. Hebrews 2 states that God crowned Jesus with glory and honor and put everything under His feet. “In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him” (Heb. 2:8). At present, not everything is subject to Jesus, though God placed everything under Him.

Those who refuse to be subject to Him eventually will receive punishment. That is, they

will be forcefully removed from God's presence, which will result in eternal torment. Those humans who are subject to Jesus, whom we call Christians, still have sinful attitudes and do not obey Him in all matters, yet accept His discipline because they are subject to Him. So there is a distinction between obedience and subjection, even in our relationship with God.

If one rebels against the authority over him, he not only disobeys, he also refuses to submit to the authority's discipline. In contrast, those who obey the authority also submit to the authority's governance. Is it possible to submit to authority's governance yet not obey? Yes, and that is the essence of Christian civil disobedience: not doing what the authority expects, but accepting the authority's response.

Civil disobedience is disobeying without rebelling, refusing to comply while continuing to submit. It basically says, "I won't do what you told me, so do what you have to do."

All of creation and human existence is directly related to God's kingdom. We exist because He made us and sustains us, and His kingdom is the focus and structure of the spiritual realm; even Satan patterned his kingdom after God's. God originated the concept of a supreme authority governing subjects, because He Himself is the supreme being. Those subjects of His kingdom who were unwilling to submit to Him were forcefully ejected from His kingdom, the essence of spiritual death since God is the source of life. So God gave us the pattern for earthly life: a human authority that governs a populace and penalizes offenders, up to and including the death penalty. That is God's system, so in effect anyone who rebels against human authority rebels against God. There are many levels of human authority we each experience, including parents, government agencies, employers and churches.

First Peter 2:13-14 reads as follows: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." We are to submit to earthly authorities for the Lord's sake. Why "for the Lord's sake"? He instituted human government; it's His design for human existence. Verse 17 reads, "Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king." Peter wrote this about AD 65, as severe persecution was breaking out in Rome.

Christians should be known as those who respect civil government; we should never be known as those who advocate rebellion or anarchy. So if we must disobey an authority, we must avoid showing disrespect for their office. The goal of Christian resistance must be to correct an untenable situation without dishonoring the person or their office. According to Scripture, Christians are to submit to civil authorities, even those who are evil and corrupt.

## **Historical Context**

During the first five years of Nero's reign as emperor of Rome, AD 54-59, he allowed others to run the empire and that was known as a period of sound administration and good order. It was after 59 that Nero took control of the empire, and brutality and excess became characteristic of his reign. Because of his abuses of power, even loyal Roman citizens and officials began to criticize and oppose him. After a fire destroyed half of Rome in 64, Nero accused the Christians of starting the fire and they became the targets of great persecution. Even today there is suspicion that Nero ordered the fire started as a ploy to distract criticism and make room for new construction projects. The Maccabean revolt broke out in Israel in 66 and Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70.

Because severe Roman suppression of Christianity began several years after Paul wrote his letter to the Roman believers, the persecution was not referenced in the letter: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established” (Rom. 13:1). However, the Epistles written later during the persecution did not contradict the earlier writings; instead, the later writings gave exactly the same instruction. We might even conclude that God documented the correct response to evil government before Nero’s wickedness fully ripened. There was no need to change anything in the early Epistles, and persecuted believers accepted and obeyed Paul’s directives.

Even before AD 64, first century believers often were persecuted, jailed, and even killed for refusing to acknowledge Caesar as a descendent of God. They refused to worship Caesar; they worshiped God only and were persecuted for doing so.

### **New Testament Examples**

As we will see, the New Testament is loaded with examples of Jesus, the apostles and early Christians knowingly and deliberately disobeying authorities on specific matters. In some cases, God even directed people through angels to disobey an earthly authority or intervened on their behalf. This was not anarchy, but obedience to the highest authority.

At the very beginning of the New Testament, we see God countering an order of the king of Israel. King Herod told the Magi, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” But after the Magi found baby Jesus and gave their gifts, they were “warned in a dream not to go back to Herod” and they “returned to their country by another route” (Matt. 2:8, 12). Apparently, God told them not to do what the king had instructed. This was during a time when disobeying a king was a capital offense.

“When [the Magi] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him’” (Matt. 2:13). Again, God in effect thwarts the plans of the king.

Since we are considering how God thwarted a human ruler, let us go briefly to the end of Jesus’ life where we see God doing it again. After Jesus’ death, Pilate, the governor of Israel, instructed that Jesus’ tomb be made secure by putting an official seal on the stone and posting a guard. Two days later, “an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it” (Matt. 27:65-66; 28:2). It is clear God would do His work regardless of any earthly king or governor’s intent.

Now let us look at Jesus during His ministry, examining the four Gospels mostly in the order in which the verses occur. This will be just a quick overview of the incidents, focusing on His responses.

One day some Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” Jesus responded by asking them why they break the command of God for the sake of their tradition. He then proceeded to rebuke them publicly, calling them hypocrites and stating they nullify the Word of God for the sake of their traditions (Matt. 15:1-14). This was a serious confrontation, because these were religious leaders, who taught the Scriptures and sat in judgment on offenders.

In Matthew 16, we see the Pharisees and Sadducees testing Jesus by asking for a sign

from heaven. He rebuked them by saying they didn't know how to interpret the signs of the times and calling them a "wicked and adulterous generation." Then He left them and went away without giving them what they requested (Matt. 16:1-4). In terms of social graces, Jesus' behavior seems almost rude.

Later Jesus warned His disciples "to guard against . . . the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:12). This was bold and very significant because the Pharisees and Sadducees were the official religious teachers and He told His disciples not to accept everything they taught.

Near the end of His ministry, Jesus pronounced seven woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, for oppressing the people they should be serving and for distorting God's law. He repeatedly said they were blind guides, hypocrites, snakes and full of wickedness, and asked how long they will escape being condemned to hell (Matt. 23:13-36). Consider whether Jesus' behavior passes the criteria given in Romans 13:6-7: "Give everyone what you owe him: . . . if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." What about the instruction of Titus 3:1-2: "Remind the people . . . to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men." Did Jesus lose control and just blow off the religious leaders? No, as God's representative on earth, Jesus pronounced judgment on them for violating God's system. Jesus said He judged only as He heard from the Father, that the Father commanded Him what to say and how to say it, that even His words were from the Father (John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28-29; 12:49-50; 14:10). His blast against the religious leaders was not an emotional outburst; it was a legitimate pronouncement of judgment from the Father. Only Jesus could have made these statements because He saw everything from the Father's perspective.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, we see Him in frequent conflict over matters of religious law with those who were unquestionably the religious authorities of His day. It was these authorities who ultimately would have Him executed. Over the centuries, the religious leaders had interpreted the Mosaic law and applied it to daily life by creating "fence laws." These were very specific laws designed to keep people from violating the law of Moses. The result was a huge number of detailed laws that eventually eclipsed the intent of the Mosaic law and put the people in bondage to legalism. It was this legalistic distortion of God's intent that Jesus rebuked.

One particular issue led to frequent conflicts between Jesus and the authorities, and that was the Sabbath. Let us examine the Gospels to see how frequently Jesus deliberately disobeyed their Sabbath laws and publicly rebuked them for abusing the system God created. You may be surprised when these verses reveal a Jesus very different from the image most people have of Him.

"One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?' He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath'" (Mark 2:23-28).

The Pharisees accused the disciples of breaking the law, which in fact they had done. Jesus defended His disciples, however, and showed that King David had done something even less acceptable; he ate the consecrated bread on the altar. Jesus did not dispute the validity of the law prohibiting harvesting grain on the Sabbath. He instead put things in right perspective: the

Sabbath was for man's benefit, not to restrict him, and human needs take precedence over the law of the Sabbath. This actually is a broad principle and applies to more than the Sabbath, because human law was made for human welfare.

“Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, ‘Stand up in front of everyone.’ Then Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or kill?’ But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (Mark 3:1-6).

Jesus knew the Pharisees were trying to catch Him breaking the Sabbath law. So He openly confronted them by having the man stand where everyone could see. He asked them a challenging question they refused to answer. Notice His reaction to their strict, condemning attitude regarding the law: He looked around at them in anger, deeply distressed. Scripture identifies only a few times Jesus became angry and it was usually the result of people's strict legal interpretation of the law that violated the intent of the law. How serious was this event? As a result of this confrontation, the Pharisees began plotting to kill Him.

“On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. “Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, ‘There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.’ The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated” (Luke 13:10-17).

There He was, calling the religious leaders “hypocrites” again. This time Jesus was speaking to the synagogue ruler, another religious authority. He contrasts a beast of burden with the woman, whom He calls a “daughter of Abraham,” which people would consider an honorable title. His point was so obvious, it humiliated those who challenged Him.

“One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?’ [By now this was a rhetorical question, because the leaders had made their point very clear.] But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, ‘If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?’ And they had nothing to say” (Luke 14:1-6).

Again, the Pharisees and other religious leaders were so obsessed with the details of their man-made laws, they overlooked the intent of God's law and the miracle of healing they had just experienced. That is what Jesus was addressing, and that is why He was unconcerned about violating their law.

One day Jesus passed by the pool at Bethesda and saw a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. Jesus said to Him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk,” and at once the man was

cured. “The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat’” (John 5:1-18). They didn’t celebrate his healing after 38 years of lameness; they adamantly insisted the man stop violating their Sabbath laws. Do you see a trend? Jesus ministered to people’s needs, even if He broke the law by doing so.

Then there was the incident in which Jesus healed a man blind from birth by spitting on the ground and putting mud on the man’s eyes. This was also on a Sabbath. The Pharisees interrogated the man, but he did not know who Jesus was. What was their response to this man’s healing? They said the man who did this was “not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath” (John 9:16). Again, Jesus ministered to people’s needs, even if it required breaking the law.

Jesus’ position on the Sabbath was very clear: man’s needs supersede the law of the Sabbath. He did not discredit the Sabbath or say it was unimportant; rather, meeting people’s needs was more important. He knowingly disobeyed an earthly law to adhere to a higher law. The dispute was essentially a legal issue. Jesus knew the current law not only violated the intent of the Mosaic law on which it was based, it also put the people into legalistic bondage. He was so strongly opposed to the current law He openly violated it and rebuked the authorities for making it. And for that, they arrested and executed Him.

Yet when we consider the passages about submitting to authorities, we note that Jesus submitted to their torture and execution, though He could have called thousands of angels to deliver Him. Would it have been wrong for Him to call the angels? No, because they were available to serve His needs. He didn’t call them, however, because doing so would have aborted His life’s mission, which was to die on the cross for the sin of humanity. Jesus was clearly disobedient to the authorities on the legal issues, but He submitted to their authority to judge and execute Him.

Jesus broke other laws, as well. For example, He associated with people the religious law said to avoid, such as sinners and tax collectors (Mark 2:15-16).

He even spoke parables against the religious leaders, such as the parable of the tenants who killed the vineyard owner’s son. When they heard the parable, they knew He had spoken the parable against them and looked for a way to arrest Him (Mark 12:1-12). At times it seemed Jesus said and did things just to antagonize them. He publicly rebuked them on many occasions (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:45-47).

It seems Jesus drove the moneychangers and merchants from the temple twice. The Gospel of John records one instance at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry after His first miracle, turning the water to wine (John 2:13-16). The Gospel of Mark records a similar instance near the end of His ministry after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a colt. This time He looked around at everything in the temple, but since it was already late, He went to Bethany. The next day He returned to the temple area and drove out the moneychangers and merchants (Mark 11:11-17). This was a premeditated act, not an emotional outburst. He evaluated the situation the day before and decided to wait. To get the full impact of what He did, we must realize the moneychangers and merchants were part of the system the religious leaders had developed. So again Jesus was attacking the religious leadership, only this time with physical violence.

Soon after Jesus forcefully cleared the temple the second time, possibly the next day, He returned to the temple and was walking through the temple courts. He returned to the scene in public. He had to know the leadership would come after Him, and they did. They demanded to know what authority He had to do these things and who gave Him that authority. Basically He

refused to tell them. He asked them a question they would not answer, so He said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (Mark 11:33).

Let us consider one more instance in which Jesus knowingly violated the religious law. He and His disciples were passing through Samaria and He sat down by a well while His disciples went into town to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus asked her for a drink. This violated the religious law and the woman knew it, because she replied, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (John 4:9).

As we stated earlier, Jesus clearly was disobedient to the authorities in regard to very specific issues in the religious law. He publicly denounced them for their hypocrisy and abuse of the religious system to oppress the people while benefiting themselves. He was not reluctant to confront them, yet He used discretion, and they hated Him. They had authority to arrest Him and they did. They presented Him to the governor who had authority to execute Him and pressed for His execution. Jesus submitted to the process and laid down His life voluntarily.

This is the man, the Son of God, whom we worship and serve. To be fair, we must recognize the legal conflict was a result of Jesus coming to earth, not the purpose. His purpose was to die on the cross for the sins of mankind, and the conflict with the religious authorities was only the catalyst, though it was a legitimate issue. Jesus did not die because He broke a religious law. He died because He willingly gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice, as atonement for sin. Our purpose for examining His disobedience was to show that civil disobedience by His followers can be appropriate.

I was discussing these Scriptures about Jesus’ civil disobedience with someone who replied he had trouble reconciling this with his image of a meek Jesus. He raised a good point, so let’s investigate it.

The Scriptures clearly describe Jesus as meek. For example, Matthew 11:29: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (KJV). Also, 2 Corinthians 10:1 refers to the “meekness and gentleness of Christ.”

My dictionary defines “meek” as follows: (1) showing patience and humility, gentle; (2) easily imposed upon, submissive. The widely held image of Jesus is one who is non-assertive, mild-mannered, weak and almost effeminate. This is a distorted image possibly caused by changes in the English language over the centuries since the King James Version was written, as well as the difficulties translating Greek to English. Our understanding of meekness today does not convey the strength of the New Testament Greek.

The Greek word translated “meekness” in the New Testament is *prautes*. It was applied to mild objects, tame animals, and gentle or pleasant people. But the word has significance only if the subject has great power or strength. An example would be a tame horse, which has great strength but is under the control of its rider. Similarly, Jesus was meek while on earth, yet He had power and authority as King of kings and Lord of lords to do whatever was necessary. He chose to invite, persuade and even rebuke, when He could have commanded. He submitted Himself to physical abuse and execution, when He could have called thousands of angels to deliver Him.

Meekness is not weakness. It is the exercise of patience and restraint; it is choosing to be gentle when you have opportunity or cause to use overwhelming force. That is the meekness of Jesus. Now we will examine instances in which Jesus’ followers disobeyed the law and the authorities.

Peter and John healed a beggar as they went to the temple one day, and this drew a crowd. The priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up while Peter and John

were speaking to the crowd and were very disturbed to hear them teaching about Jesus. They seized the disciples and put them in jail. The next day they brought the disciples before the Sanhedrin.

“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ‘Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and everyone else in Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you completely healed. He is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.” Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”’ (Acts 4:8-12). It is important to notice the opening words, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit.” What Peter said was not an emotional outburst, nor was it an expression of a rebellious attitude. He was directed by the Holy Spirit!

After interrogating them, the Sanhedrin commanded the disciples not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). The leaders made additional threats and released them, because they could not decide how to punish them, for all the people were praising God for healing the beggar.

On their release, Peter and John met with their own people and told them what had happened. Their friends began to pray and asked the Lord to “consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (v. 29). Afterward, “with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was with them all” (v. 33). They considered the threats, prayed for boldness, and continued to teach in the name of Jesus, the very thing they were commanded not to do.

After this, the believers met in Solomon’s Colonnade at the temple, and crowds gathered to be healed. As a result, the high priest and his associates were filled with jealousy.

“They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ‘Go, stand in the temple courts,’ he said, ‘and tell the people the full message of this new life.’ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people” (Acts 5:18-21).

Notice the angel told them to do exactly what the Sanhedrin had ordered them not to do. When the high priest and his associates heard the apostles were back in the temple courts teaching the people, the captain of the guard took his officers and brought the apostles back for questioning. But they did not use force because they were afraid the people would stone them. They brought the apostles before the Sanhedrin again to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood,” he said to them. Peter and the other apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men!” (vv. 28-29). The apostles then stated the Sanhedrin was in fact guilty of Jesus’ blood, but that God had exalted Him and granted repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.

When the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and wanted to put the disciples to death, but Gamaliel persuaded them not to. The leaders had the apostles flogged and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus. “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (vv. 41-42). Arrested, flogged and commanded again to cease, they returned to

teaching in the temple courts, in public and in the very place they had been arrested. Even before the Sanhedrin, the religious court, they refused to back down and spoke the truth boldly. They were flagrantly disobeying the religious leaders and clearly endangering themselves.

Notice there was a clear contradiction between God's command and that of the religious leadership. This was not a disagreement on some vague point of law. The apostles could either do what God commanded, or they could obey the Sanhedrin. There was no middle ground. We should also note that the apostles never claimed the Sanhedrin was an illegitimate government, nor did they seek to overthrow the system or ignore all of its laws. They did not advocate a revolt. They did not promote anarchy. When the human authorities demanded they stop teaching in the Lord's name, they publicly stated they would not stop and they accepted the consequences. It is that simple. And that is the only legitimate interpretation of their declaration, "We must obey God rather than men!"

Every human government will violate God's law on some point, because all humans are imperfect, including those in leadership or government positions. God alone is perfect. So it is foolish for Christians to pledge obedience to their human authorities as long as they do not violate God's Word. The civil disobedience we see in Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than men!") was selective and limited to that single area where the authorities contradicted the clear command of God.

Stephen's arrest, interrogation and execution are described in detail in Acts 6-7 and these chapters give us a glimpse of what we ourselves might expect. "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). May the same be said of us, and soon. But whenever one speaks the truth of God and God demonstrates His power, we can expect opposition to arise as it did against Stephen. His opponents argued with him but could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke. Stephen was not just speaking on his own ("his wisdom," Acts 6:10) but was being led by God ("full of God's grace and power" and "the Spirit by which he spoke," Acts 6:8, 10). May that also be true of us. His opponents couldn't counter him, so they physically seized him, took him before the Sanhedrin and falsely accused him. The high priest asked Stephen if the charges were true and the Book of Acts records Stephen's response, which must have taken several minutes for him to present. For nearly 50 verses, Stephen recounts Jewish history. Then he responds to the Sanhedrin and his accusers:

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:51-53).

Not surprisingly, everyone was furious at Stephen for saying this. "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (v. 55). He was "full of the Holy Spirit," which indicates his own motivations were set aside and God was working in him and through him. When he described what he saw, everyone basically went berserk. "At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voice, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him" (vv. 57-58). Stephen's last words were these: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (v. 60).

Stephen had done what God expected of him, which included rebuking the Sanhedrin,

and he asked God to forgive those who accused him and executed him. Can you see that Stephen did not just lose control and mouth off at his accusers and the religious leaders? He did not say those things because he was personally angry at them. Not only was he full of the Holy Spirit, he also asked God to forgive them. Unfortunately, most of us would feel like telling everyone off if we were in Stephen's situation, thinking we were justified in doing so. We must distinguish between the demands of our own sinful attitudes and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Stephen did so, and the Lord Jesus stood in his honor (v. 56)! In much the same way Jesus did, as we saw earlier, Stephen rebuked the hypocrisy of the authorities. He recognized their error, as evidenced by his request that God forgive them, but he did not protect himself or ask God to do so. On the day of Stephen's execution, great persecution broke out against the believers in Jerusalem and all except the apostles were forced to leave the city.

Acts 10 gives us the account of Cornelius and Peter. The point of this story is that God showed Peter that he was not to be limited by the teaching of the Jewish authorities. When Peter entered Cornelius' home, he said, "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28). It was against the law, but God told him to do it. Keep in mind that every follower of Jesus up to that moment had been Jewish. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the circumcised (Jewish) believers criticized him for entering a Gentile's home and eating with him. But when Peter explained what God had shown him and how the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles, his critics had no further objections and praised God for granting the Gentiles repentance unto life (Acts 11:2-3, 18). They were also willing to accept what God said, though it clearly violated their law.

A short time later, King Herod arrested some of the believers, including James the brother of John whom he executed. When Herod saw the Jews were pleased with this, he seized Peter and planned to put him on public trial. The night before the trial, an angel of the Lord woke Peter up, removed his chains, opened the prison doors and led him out the main gate of the prison (Acts 12:1-10). Peter had been arrested by the king of Israel, but God set aside the king's order and released Peter from prison. Notice that God did not rescue James, whom Herod executed. There is no explanation for God allowing one to be executed and setting another free; and since there is no explanation, we simply must acknowledge God's wisdom and sovereignty. In Peter's case, God violated the king's order.

We see a similar incident in Acts 16. Paul and Silas encountered a slave girl in Jerusalem who disturbed them for days until Paul commanded the evil spirit to come out of her. The slave's owners had earned a lot of money from her ability to predict the future, so they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the authorities. At the magistrates' orders, they were stripped, severely flogged and thrown into prison. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God when a violent earthquake shook the prison, opening all the cell doors. When the jailer discovered what had happened, Paul and Silas led him to the Lord. The authorities had flogged and imprisoned them, but God violated the orders by setting them free.

At daylight, the magistrates sent orders for the jailer to release Paul and Silas. Paul then did something very interesting: he refused to leave under those conditions. He told the officers who were sent to release him, "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out" (Acts 16:37). The authorities had violated Paul's legal rights as a Roman citizen, and he insisted they come personally, which they did because they were

alarmed to discover Paul's Roman citizenship.

What do we see in this incident? We see God again breaking the authorities' orders by releasing His people from prison. And we see that it was appropriate for Paul to stand up for his legal rights as a citizen.

Later, when Paul was in Damascus, the governor had the city guarded to arrest him. But other believers lowered Paul in a basket from a window in the wall so he could escape (2 Cor. 11:32-33). From the brief description given of the incident and the absence of any correction, we can conclude it was appropriate for Paul to escape arrest.

The New Testament also includes references to some incidents of civil disobedience from the Old Testament. The Book of Hebrews includes an honor roll of Old Testament people who lived by faith. Included among them are Moses' parents who rejected the king's edict and hid their son. And as a man, Moses left Egypt, "not fearing the king's anger" (Heb. 11:27). He was not afraid of the king's retribution for walking away from his position and responsibilities as the son of Pharaoh's daughter (Exod. 2:10).

The Book of James describes Rahab the prostitute as righteous for protecting Israel's spies. Joshua 2:1-21 tells us the king ordered Rahab to surrender the spies, but Rahab refused to do so. Instead, she diverted the troops sent to arrest them, then helped the spies escape. Let me make a very clear point: God is not condoning her prostitution or her lying to the king's troops; she was a sinner, not a moral example. God honors her instead for obeying God's will, which motivated her to disobey her king's authority.

The church was founded by a man whom the authorities considered a criminal and Christians will not fulfill their role in life without coming into conflict with the world system. The New Testament is full of instances in which Jesus and His followers knowingly and deliberately broke the human laws that countered God's will. They rebuked leadership for its hypocrisy and unrighteousness, but they never advocated overthrowing the leaders. Civil disobedience with submission; opposition without anarchy. That is the example Jesus sets before us.

**Remaining sections in this chapter:**

What About Revolt?

Civil Disobedience That Honors God

Conclusions