

Civil Disobedience

Luke 20:21-26

In a recent conversation with my dearly loved teenage granddaughter, I was explaining to her how so often it is not the actual facts about a matter that guides our responses, it is rather our "perception" of those matters that influences us most in our response, that emotions have a way of grabbing hold of some simple basic facts and turning them into something that they are not. That our preferences and our biases are incredibly powerful, causing us to do and to say things that have little to do with the "real truth" about a matter that has taken place.

As a friend of mine was fond of saying, "we discover 2% of the facts about a matter and our emotions make up the other 98% that suit our biased thoughts. And I know from personal experience that that is often true."

And on a broader scale, as we look at all the matters that are taking place around us in our culture and especially within the political process, we can see that "facts" and "real truth" are seldom ever the guiding influence in the way that people behave and respond to those matters that are taking place. It is "perception", and "perception" alone that is the guiding and driving influence.

And here today in our consideration of this scripture passage about how we are to respond to some of the demands of our governing authorities, we will again encounter this very same difficulty . . . "how we are supposed to deal with the responses that take place within our hearts and minds when we have governing authorities who are requiring things of us that we believe to be wrong."

Let's pause for a moment and again read these words of our Lord that we have been considering for the past week or so. These words are given in Luke chapter 20 beginning in verse 21. There we read,

²¹ Then they asked Him (the Lord Jesus), saying, "Teacher, we know that You say and teach rightly, and You do not show personal favoritism, but teach the way of God in truth: ²² Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" ²³ But He perceived their craftiness, and said to them, "Why do you test Me? ²⁴ Show Me a denarius. Whose image and inscription does it have?" They answered and said, "Caesar's." ²⁵ And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Luke 20:21-25)

Last week, as we studied through this passage and especially as we considered the meaning of these words in verse 25,

²⁵ . . . "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Luke 20:25)

We made some assumptions, and we determined that we should commit ourselves to certain very essential behaviors.

First, we said that as believers we are counted by the Lord Jesus as being "wheat" among the "tares", the "weeds". And further that it was, and is, the intended purpose of God that we be and remain within the circumstances where we are placed. Jesus praying those words in John chapter 17 said Father,

¹⁵ I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one." (John 17:15)

So then, it is a necessary assignment from the Lord Jesus that we remain here in amongst all the hazards and difficulties of the world around us. As believers, we are God's voice, His ambassadors, carrying on forward the plan that He put into place in sending His Son, the Lord Jesus, to die on the cross, reconciling lost souls to Him.

And as we remain here among the "weeds", we are to commit ourselves to living obedient Christian lives, being very "Christianly" in our character and in our behavior, doing "Christianly" things in the daily conduct of our lives.

And to especially exhibit "Christianly behavior" as it relates to our submission to all the many authorities that are placed above us. And as a basic instruction, Jesus gave us these words of verse 25,

²⁵ . . . "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Luke 20:25)

Later on, through the words of the Apostle Paul, God also gave us these additional instructions in Romans chapter 13. Listen!

¹ 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. (Romans 13:1-7)

Then also in 1 Peter chapter 2 we read,

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. ¹⁶ Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. (1 Peter 2:13-17)

As we said last week, all these words would be a far easier path to follow if our leaders were always Godly and benevolent. But in reality, most often, they are not. They were not in Jesus' day with the occupying forces of Caesar, and not in the days of the Apostle Paul with Emperor Nero. And neither are our leaders always Godly and benevolent in our own day.

And unfortunately, that inclination towards ungodliness is not only common within our governmental leadership, it is also interlaced all throughout the many other forms of authority and leadership that we find ourselves subject to, especially in our workplaces.

But even though that be true, that those in authority over us are often not Godly, nor are they benevolent, we are still being confronted by these words of Jesus and these words in Romans 13 telling us simply that under most all of the circumstances that we encounter each day, we should honor, respect and be in subjection to the governing authorities placed above us.

But with that being said, and knowing that all of the scriptures, including these that we have just read are "God-breathed and are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

What are we to do when we are confronted with having to participate in circumstances and conditions that violate all that we understand is holy before God? Are we to go ahead and blindly obey those earthly authorities, even when our obedience will surely be a sin to us?

This is where many of us run aground of God's true intent for our lives and for the obedience that He requires of us. And this is where we will have to deal very, very carefully with our "perception" of what is taking place and of our "perception" of what our responses are to be.

Yes, all scripture is infallible and it is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

But notice that these words say, "all scripture", which means that you and I must always be careful to understand that God gives many other instructions within these scriptures. And some of those instructions give very differing guidance, depending upon the circumstance we find ourselves within.

And what might seem to us to be a contradiction of instructions within these words of God, they are not. They are simply differing instructions for differing circumstances.

And that is why it is so very, very important that we study all of these scriptures carefully and diligently so that we can get to know the "whole heart" of God, to know His deep and intimate love for all His people. And to know, that as His beloved children, we will often be called upon to carefully examine those matters that bring questions to our "Spiritual senses" and to use wise discernment in our understanding of God's will and His purposes. But in all matters of life, to be devoutly committed in our obedience to Him.

Note carefully these words of Jesus, and God's Spirit will reveal a deep and precious truth to you. He said,

²⁵ . . . "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Luke 20:25)

Within these very infallible words, Jesus is revealing to us that there will be times when serious choices will have to be made.

Consider . . . in these words, Jesus spoke first about rendering unto Caesar that which is of Caesar, indicating that for the most part, and even though we might differ strongly with our leadership in some matters, if those matters are simply of a philosophical nature, our instruction is simply to submit to their leadership and to obey them. And may I add, this instruction is appropriate even when we know that our leaders might be very wrong.

But the second part of Jesus' instruction tells us that there are times when serious discernment may be called for, such as, when the instructions and laws given by our leadership are blatantly evil and clearly in direct opposition to the laws of God. It is then that a hard choice may be required of us, to obey the "Caesar" of our day or to obey God.

For clarity, may I restate the words that I have just said! The position that these scriptures uphold is one of biblical submission to our authorities, with a Christian being allowed to act in civil disobedience to the government only if it commands evil, such that it requires a Christian to act in a manner that is contrary to the clear teachings and requirements of God's Word.

We are given several examples of this in the scriptures. You'll recall that in Exodus chapter 1, the Egyptian Pharaoh gave the clear command to the Hebrew midwives that they were to kill all male Jewish babies. The Bible tells us that the midwives instead disobeyed Pharaoh. They "feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live".

The Bible goes on to say that the midwives lied to Pharaoh. Yet even though they lied and disobeyed their government, God rewarded those midwives. And in Exodus chapter 1, we read,

²⁰ Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty. ²¹ And so it was, because the midwives feared God, that He provided households for them. (Exodus 1:20-21)

Also, we read in Joshua chapter 2 where Rahab directly disobeyed a command from the king of Jericho to produce the Israelite spies who had come to the city to gain intelligence for battle. Instead, Rahab hid the spies and then helped

them to escape. Rahab violated a direct order from the government officials. And though she resisted, God blessed her for it, so much so that she is counted within the bloodline of the Lord Jesus.

Also, in the Book of 1st Samuel, a command was given by King Saul during a military campaign that no one could eat until Saul had won his battle with the Philistines. But Saul's son Jonathan defied his father's order and ate some honey. When Saul found out about it, he ordered his son to die. But the people resisted Saul and his command and saved Jonathan from being put to death.

Another example of civil disobedience is found in 1 Kings 18. There, a man named Obadiah who "feared the Lord greatly", defied Queen Jezebel who was killing God's prophets, and he hid away a hundred of the prophets. Such an act was in clear defiance of the ruling authority.

The Book of Daniel also records a number of examples of civil disobedience. The first is found in chapter 3 where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden idol in disobedience to King Nebuchadnezzar's command. The second is in chapter 6 where Daniel defied King Darius' decree to not pray to anyone other than the king. In both cases, God showed His approval of their actions and rescued His people from certain death.

In the New Testament, the book of Acts records the civil disobedience of Peter and John towards the authorities that were in power at the time. After Peter healed a man born lame, they were arrested for preaching about Jesus and then put in jail.

The religious authorities were determined to stop them from teaching about Jesus. But in Acts 4 Peter said these words . . .

"Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard". (Acts 4:19-20)

And then again later, the rulers confronted Peter and John and reminded them of their command to not teach about Jesus, but Peter responded in Acts 5:29 saying,

²⁹ We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29)

And there are other examples of civil disobedience, but I will give just one more, and it's found in the Book of Revelation.

There, the Antichrist commands all those who are alive during the end times to worship and obey him and to receive his mark, 666. But clearly in those circumstances men must not obey the antichrist. Yes, they might surely die, but regardless of the consequence, they must disobey.

So then, what conclusions must we draw from these differing and even seemingly contradictory events of scripture?

First of all, yes sometimes, perhaps often, the things our governing authorities do and require of us are obviously not good policies and don't accomplish much. But we need to guard our response carefully. If those things are simply wrong, even foolhardy, but not sinful, then we probably should obey those authorities.

An infallible truth that we need to keep in mind is that our God is always trustworthy, gracious and loving towards us. He can take the worst of foolish man-made plans and purposes and turn them into good things to benefit His beloved creatures. So, we must be careful in the response that we show.

But however, if the things those governing authorities require of us are obviously sinful and will cause us to violate the laws of God, then we must surely obey God rather than obey those governing authorities.

Our first response should always be to pray for our leaders and to pray for God to intervene to change any ungodly path that our leaders are pursuing. As we are told in 1 Timothy 2,

“ . . . I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity”. (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

In addition to praying for our leaders, we here in America are permitted to peaceably work to install new and Godly government leaders. And we should do that, fervently, as unto the Lord.

But in those circumstances when the government's laws or commands continue to be in direct violation of God's laws and commands, civil disobedience may be an option that is permissible before God.

And further, we most assuredly should resist those commands that would compel us to sin and to do evil.

And when we do find it necessary to disobey those evil commands, if possible, we should resist in a non-violent way. If fleeing seems appropriate, then we should prayerfully consider that option. But if we are unable to flee, we must freely accept the punishment for our actions, even if it means our death.

All of this might seem so far removed from reality for you and me as we live comfortably here within our peaceful communities. And for the present, it generally is. But when comes the day, and according to these scriptures that day surely will come, may I ask, what will you be prepared to do?

Will you be able to discern "real truth" and know that you should not be joining in with the evil one and violating the laws of God? And if you do discern that you should resist, will you?

These scriptures tell us that the most evil of days are still yet ahead of us. But even now, are you, am I, part of that portion of our citizenry that by our misguided "perceptions" are giving unspoken permission and even our encouragement for corrupt authorities to reach on forward with even more vile and corrupt leadership, leadership that promotes the un-godliest of moral conduct, conduct like the slaughter of our little babies, and the open acceptance and approval of Sodomite behavior, and all the many other similar vile and sinful behaviors.

When we enter that polling booth, do we cast our vote for a culturally biased candidate, or perhaps is our vote racially biased, or is our vote based simply on a political party bias that we have always favored?

Or are we able to recognize that such choices are basically wrong in the sight of God? And if we believe them to be so, what are we to do?

And when we see that our prevailing laws and our governing leaders are clearly in opposition to the holy laws of God, what is the stand we should take, and when should we take it?

Will we in fear wait until it is too late to really be of any help. Or will we step on ahead and be as those Hebrew midwives or as Rahab or even as those three Hebrew men who defied King Nebuchadnezzar?

Before we close, may we give one more consideration to this matter of our “perception” that so often guides our attitudes and behaviors. And yes, sometimes, perhaps often, our “perception” can be right and good. But unfortunately, it is also true that sometimes, and perhaps more often, our “perception” can carry us into territories of wrongness that is not only misguided, it is evil.

My encouragement dear Christian is that you guard your emotions carefully. And that you earnestly search these scriptures for your answers to the questions that you encounter each day. And that you let your responses be guided by these infallible words of our Lord and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit who lives in you.

And as you and I make our choices, may we be guided by these words of our Lord given here in Deuteronomy chapter 30. Listen . . .

¹⁵ "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, ¹⁶ in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you . . . ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I announce to you today that you shall surely perish . . .

¹⁹ I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; ²⁰ that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He *is* your life and the length of your days. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Pray with me.

