

Should We Obey The Laws Of Our Government?

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God hates rebellion (I Samuel 15:23; Isaiah 30:1; 63:10)! He hates the attitude of lawlessness it produces, as well as the crop of wicked fruit that results from it.

The prince of all rebellion is Satan the Devil, also known as "the sum of all moral impurities." Though we do not see this demon physically, the influence of this arch-rebel permeates our society. We need not look far to see children rebelling against their parents, artists rebelling against the status quo and fringe groups rebelling against the government.

Satan personifies rebellion. It was Helel's rebellious action that saw him tossed out of heaven and renamed Satan, Adversary:

How you are fallen from heaven, O [Helel], son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God [angels]; I will also sit [rule] on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north [God's government]; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High." Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit. (Isaiah 14:12-15)

Helel rebelled against the laws of God, thus he rebelled against God Himself. Desiring independence from God's legislation, he tried to depose God and become the sovereign ruler of the universe. Great chaos and destruction resulted among the heavenly bodies and on earth (Genesis 1:2) when God "cast [him] as a profane thing out of the mountain of God" (Ezekiel 28:16).

Because of his rebellion, we are today experiencing its evil fruit. Notice how Isaiah describes the reaction of people who will look back upon Satan's career after God finally binds him forever in the Lake of Fire:

Those who see you will gaze at you, and consider you, saying, "Is this the man [Hebrew *ish*, male, individual, person] who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world as a wilderness and destroyed its cities, who did not open the house of his prisoners?" (Isaiah 14:16-17)

These people are describing the effects of Satan's rule on this earth now!

We say, "It's a jungle out there!" And it is! The earth seems to be teetering on the edge of destruction. Our world is a wilderness, our cities rise only to fall in war, our nations tremble at life's uncertainties and the god of this world, Satan (II Corinthians 4:4, KJV), holds the people captive spiritually. All this evil fruit can be traced back to his rebellious attitude.

Worldwide Rebellion

Satan's influence extends over the whole world. In some places, we see it in war after war, and in others, unrest and instability. In America, we have political, racial and religious factions at each

other's throats. Gangs of young men and women roam the streets of our cities, robbing, destroying and killing without regard for the laws of the land and absolutely no consideration for human life.

Our populace chafes under the restraint of law. Many are willing to cheat on their taxes, take money under the table, steal from their employers, exceed speed limits and stab their competitors in the back. Everyone seems to be working *to get around* the national, state and local laws—and God's laws too!

The television and movie industries contribute massively to the nation's problems through the fare they offer for our viewing consumption. Many—if not most—of the shows we watch depict the breaking of God's commandments. They produce story lines glorifying rebellion, sexual promiscuity, adultery, murder, war, stealing, lying and aggressive competition. Movies like *Thelma and Louise*; *Dirty*, *Rotten Scoundrels*; *Natural Born Killers*; *Pulp Fiction*; *The Terminator* and the James Bond movies make heroes out of the ones who are breaking all the laws!

Governments also show the effects of Satan's rebellious influence. Our leaders, who should be setting an ethical, honest, moral example for the rest of us, must frequently defend themselves against charges of fraud, sexual misconduct, obstruction of justice and illegal covert operations. This list does not include wasteful spending on pork projects, expensive travel junkets, unbalanced budgets and questionable lawmaking.

From the Supreme Court to local juvenile courts, the judicial system makes a mockery of our laws. Appeals courts overturn good and just laws because of minor technicalities that may discriminate against one in a million people. Proper convictions and sentences are derailed by wealthy or powerful parties who can afford high-priced, famous attorneys who work the system's loopholes or confuse the jury by manufacturing "reasonable doubt."

Whether we realize it or not, all of this corruption and rebellion has an affect upon us. We may not understand how it could influence us one way or another, but nevertheless, we cannot help noticing it and being influenced by it.

Sovereign Citizenship

In the United States, we can see the effect of this mistrust in the form of militias, paramilitary groups mustered from citizens dissatisfied with big government and expanding federal control. These militias are born of mistrust in the country's leadership and direction. Instead of regaining citizens' rights, their actions present Americans with more rights being removed through anti-terrorist legislation aimed against them and the ghastly specter of civil war.

Some groups are pursuing the idea of "sovereign citizenship." Under this general term, several variations of this status exist, one of which is the Freemen holed up by the FBI in Jordan, Montana. Affiliation with sovereign citizenship ideas causes a person to scrutinize tax, federal, state and local laws carefully to find flaws and loopholes.

A sovereign citizen—because he is sovereign, that is, he possesses supreme authority—feels justified in not obeying any law with which he personally disagrees. He will often not pay taxes, get a driver's license, pay traffic fines, incorporate his business, get a marriage license, build a home to code or in any way submit to government. He feels that doing such things will enfranchise him to the state.

Some have carried this concept over into religious areas. The resulting religion, though sincere, is one that requires much effort, as it goes against the grain of more organized churches, and its fruit and attitude are bad. Since, as sovereign, they are above all human authority, they will not submit to the spiritual guidance of the church. They lean on the understanding that they are accountable to God alone, but even in this they have deceived themselves! In their pride they have only made themselves accountable to God *on their own terms and according to their own views of God's law* .

This attitude of sovereign citizenship is one that is sweeping this country in one form or another. If we are not careful, it can influence us in God's church. In fact, it has already caused several of our brethren to leave us to join the growing ranks of "independent Christians."

Sovereignty and Rebellion

A sovereign is a ruler, a monarch. Such a person has the authority to reign, to make laws and to mete out punishments. When one claims sovereignty, he puts himself on an extremely lofty pedestal. *Webster's Dictionary* defines *sovereignty* as "supreme excellence or an example of it; supreme power especially over a body politic; freedom from external control: autonomy; controlling influence; one that is sovereign."

When "citizen" is added to the mix, a strange oxymoron results. A citizen is one who lives in a certain place and is subject to its laws. Granted, citizenship implies being entitled to the rights and privileges of a freeman, but these rights and privileges are bestowed *by law and common consent*, not by individual sovereignty. A sovereign citizen feels he is totally in charge, free from all external authority and influence.

The last verse of Judges perfectly describes what is happening today in America: "In those days there was no king in Israel; *everyone did what was right in his own eyes* ." It is this attitude that the sovereign citizenship movement holds; it is in reality rebellion against the laws of man in this society. Seeing the flaws of man's government and the weakness of its leaders, they perceive a "better way," reject the laws of the land and do what they feel is right.

But is this what God wants?

Rebellion is "the act of rebelling; revolt; open resistance to, or defiance of any authority or control." Does this idea have a familiar ring to it, especially considering Satan's rebellion described in Isaiah 14? God hates rebellion, comparing it to witchcraft: "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you [Saul] have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king" (I Samuel 15:23).

From Satan's insurrection, God knows the price of rebellion. A rebellious, stubborn, unsubmitive heart will destroy one whom He has called, denying him entrance into the Kingdom of God. As Herbert Armstrong said many times, "God will not allow anyone into His Kingdom whom He cannot rule!"

Obeying Government

Though all of us should understand obedience to the laws of man, it is good from time to time to ask, "Should we obey the governments of man over us?" Should we obey it if we consider it an "illegal" government?

The apostle Paul had to address this subject two thousand years ago in Romans 13. Albert Barnes in his *Barnes' Notes* suggests what prompted Paul to write this to the Roman church:

In the seven first verses of this chapter, the apostle discusses the subject of the duty which Christians owe to civil government. . . . There is no doubt that he had express reference to the peculiar situation of the Christians at Rome; but the subject was of so much importance that he gives it a *general* bearing, and states the great principles on which all Christians are to act. The circumstances which made this discussion proper and important were the following: (1.) The Christian religion was designed to extend throughout the world. . . . Christians professed supreme allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ; he was their lawgiver, their sovereign, their judge. It became, therefore, a question of great importance and difficulty, *what kind* of allegiance they were to render to earthly magistrates. (2.) The kingdoms of the world were then *pagan* kingdoms. The laws were made by pagans, and were adapted to the prevalence of heathenism. Those kingdoms had been generally founded in conquest, blood, and oppression. Many of the monarchs were bloodstained warriors; were unprincipled men; and were polluted in private, and oppressive in their public character. Whether Christians were to acknowledge the laws of such kingdoms and of such men, was a serious question. . . . Soon the hands of these magistrates were to be raised against Christians in the fiery scenes of persecution; and the duty and extent of submission to them became a matter of very serious inquiry. ("Romans," p. 284.)

How did Paul respond in Romans 13:1-7 to these inquiries?

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, custom to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

The phrase "let every soul be subject" is a military term implying subordination. It is a willingness to occupy our proper place, to yield to the authority over us. That these governing authorities are "appointed by God" stems from another military term denoting the order or organization found in a military unit. Not only should we be subject, but we should submit in the knowledge that God Himself has had a hand in allowing them to exist!

Paul's conclusion flows naturally from this. Those who resist, or rebel against, man's governments also resist the ordinance of God! What God has ordained we should obey! This means we are to regard man's governments as instituted by God and agreeable to His will. This is a hard pill to swallow for those who consider themselves sovereign!

Being Subject

Paul continues with his instruction with a warning that, if we break the law, we will be punished by the civil government as lawbreakers. Those in authority generally do not punish people for doing good, but they have God-given authority to punish those who do not accept their rule and laws. The apostle says we should be afraid to break man's laws because his government administrators are really "God's ministers"! They are servants of God! Thus, we should be subject not just for fear of punishment, but also for conscience' sake.

He concludes the section with specific instruction concerning taxes, custom, obedience and respect. He says, "Pay your taxes and your fines. Obey the laws and respect government officials." Sovereign citizens directly disobey this explicit command of God's Word on each count!

Many who complain about the government over us fail to remember the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. He and His apostles lived under an "illegal" government for years; they were subject to Roman conquerors who levied stiff taxes and brutally oppressed freedoms. But what was Jesus' instruction, specifically regarding taxes?

[The Pharisees asked,] "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:17-21)

Thus, Jesus advises us to pay our taxes, as He also paid them. Matthew 17:24-27 shows that He paid the Temple tax as well.

Some, considering this world to be Babylon, refuse to come under its laws. Though this world is truly Babylon the Great (Revelation 18), these people also forget the examples of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. These men not only lived in literal Babylon, but also served in Nebuchadnezzar's government, giving great honor and loyalty to the king. When Babylon's laws conflicted with God's laws, as in the case of idolatry (Daniel 3), they stood rock solid for God's way, willing to take whatever punishment the civil government gave them. This is the principle we should always follow (Acts 5:29).

God has appointed authority over men to bring order to our society, and in bringing order, He has given each of us an opportunity to learn the lesson of how to submit to government. This is a lesson we all *must* learn, for even Christ is subject to the Father (I Corinthians 15:23-28)!

Practical Submission

Besides these civil authorities, God has given offices of authority to nearly everyone. In the home, the husband leads the family (Ephesians 5:23). When he is away at work, the children are subject to the authority of their mother (Exodus 20:12; Colossians 3:20). At work, though, the husband is frequently subject to his employer (Colossians 3:22).

As we mix with the society around us, we fall into many situations where others have authority over us in their particular niche. The bus driver has the authority to ask us to conduct ourselves properly

on his bus. The movie usher can grant us entrance to the theater and direct us to a seat. A park official can ask us not to pick flowers or walk on the grass. In whatever position we fill, we have the authority to do that job properly.

What does obedience to authority produce? Harmony, accord, agreement, order, peace and above all *the character of submission to law* that God wants to perfect in each of us. God has seen to it that we all have authority, so that we might learn how to handle it and learn to respect it. Additionally, He has also given us many opportunities to come under authority, so that we might learn to submit and be governed. When we learn these lessons, we can be taught and become of greater use to God.

This lesson is so important that God will place His people under a heavy hand to teach them to be governed. He has done this in the past, as Nehemiah tells the poignant story of Israel's history (Nehemiah 9). How many times Israel rebelled against God and found themselves cowering under the lash of harsh taskmasters!

Yes, we do see abuses of law in this country. More and more of our rights are being stripped from us as our nation weakens. As the end of the age nears, problems and corruption in government seem to multiply. Our approach to all this, however, should not be rebellion, but we should obey the law in wisdom, trusting in God to guide and protect us from injustice and oppression.

Because, as "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), Satan broadcasts his attitude of rebellion over the whole earth, it can affect any of us. Do not let this proud attitude of personal sovereignty distract us from the goal of seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). As part of this pursuit, let us respect authority and work on developing the submissive character of Jesus Christ!