



**“Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king”**  
(I Peter 2: 9-17).

### **Civil Obedience**

**Central Truth:** Obedience to civil law is a religious duty.

**L206. Date:** November 1995. **Text:** I Peter 2:9-17.

**Topic:** Obedience: To Government.

Should a Christian engage in “civil disobedience”? Should you participate in blocking entrances to abortion clinics? Should you refuse to pay taxes when officers of government are spending the money unwisely, or in ways that violate your conscience as a Christian? Should you refuse to enroll for military draft or flee the country to keep from serving in the armed services? Should you refuse to drive within the speed limit because you are in a hurry? Where is the boundary which limits civil disobedience for a Christian citizen?

The answer to those questions is in the term itself: “civil disobedience.” Adding “civil” to the term does not change it. Disobedience is still disobedience—breaking the law of the land. The approach of these comments is that Christians should not engage in civil disobedience, particularly in a republic where citizens elect their officers of government. If a law is wrong, elect representatives who will change the law.

Christians should concentrate on civil obedience by (1) recognizing the authority of law, (2) giving respect to officers of the land, and (3) meeting the civic obligations required by law. Read Romans 13:1-9 for the biblical wording of those statements.

### **Reasons for Civil Disobedience**

Civil disobedience is not at all uncommon in our society. Many times Christians are involved in it. Here are three reasons that some citizens

choose to disobey the law.

**Some civil disobedience is just wicked rebellion against duly constituted authority.** You see it today in armed robbery, drive-by shootings, rape, looting, street protests, and other ways.

God is very clear in His statements on rebellion against a duly constituted government. *“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation”* (Romans 13:1, 2). Four principles catch our attention here.

(1) The citizen is to be subject to the governmental authority under which he lives, even if the officers of government are not righteous people. (2) Each government is ordained of God for the purpose of keeping order in society. (3) To resist the institution of government is to resist what God has ordained. (4) Resistance to duly constituted government will be punishment.

Those who rebel against the authority of government are rebelling against God. That is sin. Some civil disobedience is an honest desire to right a wrong. Many faithful Christians believe that abortion is sin and will bring God's judgment upon our nation unless it is stopped. Therefore, they break the law by blocking access to medical clinics where abortions are performed. Their motive is right, but their actions are wrong if they break the law. It is possible to protest without breaking the law of access.

In a country with a democratic/republican form of government, civil disobedience is unnecessary. If elected representatives in office do not meet the wishes of the people, vote them out by electing officers who do represent the people. It may take a little longer that way, but it is the best way to change things.

**Some civil disobedience is mob psychology, in which an unsuspecting person is caught up in affairs he would not do alone.** The best way to protect yourself against that is to get away from where you know an illegal activity is about to take place.

How far can a Christian go in protest? He can go as far as the law allows, but he must go no further. The world speaks against Christians at best. We will only enhance that image if we are arrested and “suffer as an evildoer” (I Peter 4:15). So write letters, make phone calls, march in street parades, attend prayer vigils, and work to correct the wrong you see. But do not rebel against duly constituted authority in your protests.

## **Reasons for Civil Obedience**

In I Peter 2:9-17 we find reasons for obeying the law of the land as good Christian citizens. But remember that there is a difference between a citizen and a Christian citizen. The Christian citizen has an added incentive for being a good citizen: *“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake”* (I Peter 2:13).

**You have a unique position as a child of God in this world** (verses 9, 10). First, look at what you are: *“an elect race, a consecrated nation, a people claimed by God as His very own.”* Place that in contrast to Jesus' statement to others: *“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it”* (John 8:44). As the people of God, Christians shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15). Those who live in rebellion against God's might rebel against man's laws. But how can those who submit to God rebel against his nation when God has commanded him to submit to it?

Submission to human government is an act of submission to God. How can we be *“holy and without blame before him”* if we disobey Him in this area (Ephesians 1:4)? Those who are called a *“holy people unto the LORD thy God”* those whom *“the LORD hath chosen”* (Deuteronomy 14:2) must manifest that high position in their citizenship. *“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God”* (I Corinthians 10:31). Your citizenship on earth reflects your citizenship in heaven.

**You have a unique opportunity to “shew forth the praises of him that hath called you”** (verse 9). What was God's purpose in calling you to salvation in Christ? Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14 answers, *“to the praise of the glory of his grace . . . to the praise of his glory, . . . unto the praise of his glory.”* Thus your greatest accomplishment in life is to glorify God. Can you glorify God by disobeying Him and by breaking the law of the land? The Bible warns, *“Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters”* (I Peter 4:15). You are to show forth His praises, not your rebellion.

**You have a personal requirement to maintain a good conduct before unbelievers** (verses 11, 12). There are two ways you can do that. First, you can refrain from living by the lusts of the flesh. It is not surprising when a non-Christian indulges the cravings of his earthly nature. But *“they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts”* (Galatians 5:24). Having put to death those passions, they can represent God as His dear children. Indulging fleshly lusts will hurt the Christian internally since they war against the soul, and externally since they blemish his

influence for Christ.

Second, you can follow an honorable lifestyle, “having your conversation honest among the Gentiles” (verse 12). Maintaining good conduct among those who live otherwise is a great witness for Christ. Christians must never adopt the principle, “*Let us do evil, that good may come*” (Romans 3:8). The end does not justify the means when the means is unlawful.

Third, you can exert a good influence that causes sinners to see your good works and glorify God (verse 12). Ignoble conduct by Christians never brings sinners to God. But one who lives uprightly is a living testimony to grace. The Christian lives under this commission: “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:16). Can you do it better by obeying the law or by breaking it?

**You have a wonderful potential to show Christian citizenship in the non-Christian world** (verses 13-17). So you “*submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake*” (verse 13). That means that you are to obey the laws of the government under which you live. It also means to respect all officers of government (kings, governors) who are responsible for enforcing those laws. Keep a clear conscience in all things. “*Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth*” (Romans 14:22).

Exert an influence for civic righteousness (verses 15, 16). People may accuse the Christian of wrongdoing. But you must live so that no one will believe such foolish talk. You are free in Christ, but you must not use that freedom as an excuse for doing wrong. You show your faith by your works (James 2:17, 18). Some things, which are permissible for you, are not advisable (I Corinthians 6:12). Be careful to protect your Christian influence.

Show respect to all (verse 17). Here is a verse to memorize: “*Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.*” (1) Honor every person, whatever his race or condition, because he bears the image and likeness of God. (2) Love all your Christian brothers and sisters because they are mutual members of the family of God. (3) Reverence God as your Father and head of the divine family. (4) Honor the rulers because they are servants of God in the realm of human government (Romans 13:4).

Remember that you are more than a citizen; you are a Christian citizen. And “Christian” makes a world of difference in your citizenship. Citizens get the kind of government they pray for, and prayer can change the destiny of nations (II Chronicles 7:14). Therefore, obey every law except that which

requires you to personally violate the law of God.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What civic obligations does a Christian citizen have?
2. What is civil disobedience?
3. Why do some get involved in civil disobedience?
4. How far can a Christian go in civil disobedience and be approved of God?
5. What authority does the law of the land have over a Christian?
6. How can a Christian show objection to a law without becoming a lawbreaker?
7. How can a Christian work to get a bad law changed?
8. Why should Christian citizens vote for Christian candidates?
9. How does II Chronicles 7:14 relate to good government?
10. How can you show Christian citizenship in your community?