A TIME TO DISPOBEY by Payton Miller

If you have been living in America over the past year or so, you have likely asked yourself questions along these lines: How are God’s people supposed to conduct themselves in face of an evil government? Should God’s people have done anything differently when commanded to shut down assembling on the Lord’s Day? What will God’s people do if the government demands something similar, or worse, in the future? Do we have biblical examples where God’s people were put in similar situations to compromise their faith, priorities, beliefs, principles, conscience, etc., by those in authority and, if so, what was their response?

These questions and the subsequent debates often cause polarizing responses. This tendency to flee to one extreme or the other often has to do with the fact that some scriptures teach one principle while others teach a seemingly contradictory principle. For instance, how can it be that Romans 13 tells us that Christians “must be in subjection” to government and Acts 5:29 teaches us to “obey God rather than men?” The solution to reconciling these passages is not to pick a side and set up camp no matter what we encounter. The solution is to apply each passage appropriately given the circumstances, understanding that our reasoning on a particular issue should never be limited to one passage if the Bible provides more instruction about it somewhere else.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven…” With respect to governmental demands, the totality of the Bible makes it clear that there is “a time to obey” and “a time to disobey.” The truth of the matter is that God expects us to be people who are well trained to know when to submit to God by our *obedience to government* and when to submit to God by our *disobedience to government.* To quote the famous line from Mr. Miyagi in *Karate Kid:* “Balance is key.”

The dilemma for Christians often arises when we find ourselves in situations where we have to exercise our “powers of discernment” (Heb. 5:14) and determine whether God would be more pleased with our obedience or our disobedience. Where is that line? My purpose is not to answer that question for you, but rather to provide what I see in Scripture as examples of God’s people practicing some degree of civil disobedience, defined as “refusal to comply with certain laws/demands as a peaceful protest.” Allow me to offer these seven circumstances as a guideline:

1. When innocent life was on the line (Ex. 1:8-22; Heb. 11:23; Josh. 2:1-24; Jas. 2:25; Heb. 11:31; Est. 4:8-17).

2. When conscience or resolution were threatened (Dan. 1:8-20).

3. When religious customs or observances were disregarded, disturbed, or interrupted (Dan. 6:1-28; Ez. 3-5).

4. When allegiance was questioned or priorities were blatantly rearranged (Dan. 3:1-30).

5. When the gospel was at stake (Ac. 4:1-21; Ac. 5:17-33).

6. When citizenship rights were violated (Ac. 16:16-39; Ac. 22:22-29).

7. When the spirit of the law was missed (Matt. 12:1-14; Jn. 5:1-18).

In short, how did these biblical characters respond when confronted with these dilemmas?

• When given a direct command by Pharaoh to kill the male Hebrew babies, the Hebrew midwives “did not do as the King of Egypt commanded them,” lied when questioned, and God “dealt well with them” for having “feared God.”

• When the King of Jericho sent to Rahab to give up the Israelite spies, she purposefully went against those orders, lied when confronted, and, as a result, God’s people “dealt kindly and faithfully” toward her—*resulting in her being mentioned twice in the New Testament as a model of active faith.*

• When Esther had an opportunity to rescue her people from certain death at the hands of the king, she determined to boldly approach him on this matter, “though it is against the law.”

• When Daniel was expected to fit in by defiling himself with the King’s food and drink, he resolved to speak up, stand out, endure potential pressures, was granted his request—*and God gave him “learning, skill, and understanding.”*

• When the newly signed law read “Don’t pray to anybody but the king”, Daniel, with full knowledge of the edict, “did as he had done previously” by praying to God all three times in the same location—*with his windows open!*

• When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were ordered to compromise their allegiance to God by bowing to the king’s image, they “paid no attention” and refused to bow even unto the point of death—*and were eventually rescued by God!*

• When Peter and the apostles were charged to stop speaking and teaching anything about Jesus, they publicly continued preaching and, later when confronted about their defiance, responded that they “must obey God rather than men.”

• When Paul was mistreated by the authorities, he responded by understanding and utilizing his citizenship rights for the benefit of the kingdom and to save his own skin—*and the government, in fear, apologized!*

• When the Pharisees attempted to trap Jesus into breaking the letter of the law, He pointed the religious leaders to the spirit of the law by referencing an Old Testament example.

• When the “powers that be” pressured God’s people into ceasing their work on the temple and indirectly prevented their worship, they *complied* and a whole book (Haggai) was written about how that was not God’s desired response.

Despite what Romans 13 and a couple other passages teach as general principles for Christian living, numerous specific examples show us that civil disobedience can be a godly response to godless authority. Depending on the circumstances, this practice was not only acceptable, but even encouraged, and outright expected of God’s people.

The same is true for Christians today, both in America and across the globe. We should not be surprised when doing the right thing puts us at odds with a worldly government (1 Pet 4:12-19). Suffering at the hands of evil leadership for Christ’s sake should bring us no fear or shame. (1 Pet 3:13-17). Sometimes this will involve us telling the government where we stand, living our lives accordingly, and dealing with the consequences. In order to prevent these types of situations, Christians should be praying that the government not interfere with our walk with Christ (1 Tim 2:1-3.) When interference does arise, may God help us to follow the pattern from “former days…written down for our instruction” (Rom 15:4).

*14 Joslin Ct., Bloomington, IL 61704 • payjay94@gmail.com*