

*When (the authorities) saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus... Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. – Acts 4:13-21*

We've talked in the past about the different ways characters in the bible have dealt with their ruling authorities. Moses challenged them. Joshua overthrew them. David ruled them. Jesus all but ignored them. Paul obeyed them because God had put them there. Peter submitted to them in imitation of Jesus. And John endured them. There is no single way the bible tells us to relate to the government we are under.

Yet while the New Testament seems to be pretty uniform in its call to submit to the government, we do get stories like this one where direct disobedience is called for. When the Sanhedrin calls Peter and John to stop preaching about Jesus, they simply refuse. "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to Him?" This is the question we all need to ask and answer. The name for this is *civil disobedience*, and for Christians it is a matter of mission and discipleship.

This morning I had an interesting conversation with a pastor friend of mine and we got talking about people, even from our very churches, who are tired of sheltering in place here in COVIDland and so are ignoring the guidelines of the government, fighting back against the rules, and even protesting against the authorities. They are claiming their right to civil disobedience.

The question we asked one another was this: when is civil disobedience really just disobedience? When should we as Christians stand up against the authorities and when should we submit to them? And the answer, my friends, is simple: for disciples, civil disobedience is always about mission, never about us. Should we protest the lockdown because we are sick and tired of staying in our houses? No. Should we ignore the guidelines because we really want to see someone else without a video monitor getting between us? No. But what if I REALLY want to? Don't I have a right to do what I want?

If the government proclaims that we cannot worship anymore, or that shelters and food banks and care ministries must stop, then we have a right to continue with our mission even if it means ignoring the government regulations. But when the reality is that we are just tired, or jittery, or bored... when it is about our comfort and desires instead of the mission of God... then our ignoring of the guidelines is not civil disobedience, it's just disobedience.

One final word. We as Christians tend to be extremely adept at twisting our idea of mission to suit our own desires. Watch for that tendency in yourself as you read this. "But going out to hang with friends at the park might just lead to a conversation about God, so it's ministry, so it's ok!" Um, no. If you are going because God has called you to preach there, then by all means go. I'll even go with you. But any motivation that begins with our own comfort, our own desires, or our own wants is not mission.

Questions to ponder:

On a scale of 1 to 10, how hard is sheltering in place for you today? How has that changed in the last 2 months? Are you still willing to sacrifice for the safety of our vulnerable populations?

Read a few of the stories in the bible of God's people interacting with their local government and see what you can learn from it.