

Masks, social distancing, singing, and civil disobedience
November 16, 2020

1. Scripture introduction

- a. This morning we are taking a break from our Ephesians series to address a very relevant topic...

2. Prayer for illumination...

3. Sermon introduction....

- a. In 1955, Rosa Parks took her seat on a bus in Montgomery Alabama. It was a long day, and she was tired. A short time later a white man demanded her seat and then pointed at the sign behind her seat that said, white passengers only. But Rosa Parks was sick and tired of being discriminated against, so she refused to budge. She remained in her seat, breaking a local law. This sparked a city-wide bus boycott, that inspired massive protests across the country, which added momentum to the burgeoning civil rights movement of the 1950s.
- b. Rosa Parks disobeyed the governing authorities. Now we consider her a hero.
- c. This raises a very important and relevant question, when should we disobey the governing authorities?
- i. Our governor recently prohibited congregational singing, gathering with friends in homes, and he continues to mandate masks and social distancing.
- d. How should we respond to these mandates? Should we disobey? To help us think this question through, I'm going to address five subjects.

1. The Bible and civil authority.

- a. **Romans 13:1–4 (ESV)** — **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.
- b. **See also 1 Peter 2:13-14**
- c. In describing the historical context of Romans 13, one scholar writes,
- i. "Caligula and Nero were two of the most depraved madmen ever to exercise despotic rule over people. And the Christians themselves were the object of their vitriolic hatred. Yet Paul said, 'Submit.'"¹
- d. The Bible unambiguously commands Christians to submit to the civil authorities. This implies that we must joyfully obey traffic laws, pay taxes, and pull building permits.
- i. I think Romans 13 is especially challenging for Americans to obey.

¹ Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 1995), 484.

- ii. Compared to many cultures, we are fiercely independent, highly individualistic, and very opposed to authority.
- iii. Why? There are many reasons, but one reason is probably grounded in the fact that our nation was founded by civil disobedience. In the 1770s, we threw off the shackles of British authority and formed our own nation.
- iv. Rebellion against authority is in our DNA, not only as sons of Adam, but also as sons of America.
- v. Fighting the man is such a part of our nation's history, that many of us are blind to it.
- vi. But, you can sometimes hear it in our advertising campaigns-
 1. "No rules, just right" Outback Steakhouse (owned by Americans)
 2. "have it your way" Burger King- don't submit to the man, have it your way!
 3. "obey your thirst." Sprite- don't obey the rules... obey your thirst!
- vii. You can also hear this mentality from our cultural icons.
 1. "Nobody tells me what to do." Marlon Brando
 2. "Question authority... Then ignore it!" Joseph Barback
 3. "I did it my way" Frank Sinatra
- viii. There is a little bit of this mentality in all of us, isn't there? Especially if we are Americans.
- ix. But, if we are Christians we must submit to the civil authorities.
- x. Why?
 1. A Christian is someone who follows Jesus.
 2. Jesus was incredibly submissive. (gospel)
 3. We should be eager to submit to civil authority!!!
- e. Christians are not only called to obey the civil authorities, we are also called to honor the civil authorities by praying for them.
- f. **1 Timothy 2:1-2 (ESV)** — **1** First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, **2** for kings and all who are in high positions, that they may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.
- g. Furthermore, we are told to speak no evil of our civil authorities....
- h. **Titus 3:1-2 (ESV)** — **1** Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, **2** to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.
- i. The Bible is clear, we must submit to the civil authorities.
- j. Yet, the Bible honors specific individuals for disobeying the civil authorities. This brings us to the next subject....
- k. *First, the Bible and civil authority*

2. The Bible and civil disobedience

a. The Bible provides several examples of civil disobedience.

i. The Egyptian midwives

1. **Exodus 1:15–17 (ESV) — 15** Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, **16** “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” **17** But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.

ii. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego break the law by refusing to bow down to the image of king Nebuchadnezzar.

iii. In Daniel 6, Daniel breaks the law by praying to YHWH and he is thrown into the lion’s den.

iv. The apostles

1. **Acts 4:18–20 (ESV) — 18** So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. **19** But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, **20** for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

2. **Acts 5:29 (ESV) — 29** But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.

b. These texts, and a few others, give Christians rationale for defying the civil authorities when they are told to do something that God forbids, or when they are forbidden from doing something that God commands.

c. Ethicist Robertson McQuilkin sums up the convictions of many on the topic of civil disobedience with these words,

i. “Thus, when commanded to disobey the revealed will of God, the Christian must disobey that human command; when forbidden to do something good that is not mandated by Scripture, the Christian may, under some circumstances, disobey the human command.”²

d. Illustration:

i. In April of 1521, Martin Luther stood on trial before Charles V, the most powerful magistrate in Europe. Charles was surrounded by his soldiers and some of the most important politicians and church leaders in Europe.

ii. Luther walked into the large room as a lowly monk. He stood down on the floor surrounded by hundreds of heads of state looking down on him, from the bleachers.

² McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 484.

- iii. When Luther was brought before the diet all his books were on a table beside him. The prosecutor pointed to a stack of books and asked are all those yours. He said yes....
 - iv. “Will you recant of these writings?” Luther wanted a chance to speak and they said no...
 - 1. He was told you must answer yes or no!
 - 2. The emperor was advised... don’t let Luther speak, he is far too persuasive.
 - v. He knew that if he did not recant, he would probably die, a slow and agonizing death. He asked for a day to think about it.
 - 1. This is very odd... he was so bold before but now he is timid. Why? He was mortal. And put yourself in his shoes for a moment.
 - vi. The next day he was brought back before the counsel and again asked if he would recant of his writings.
 - vii. **Famous reply-** *“Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.”* (CH1, 16)
 - viii. As soon as he made this final statement, the Spanish guards shouted, “to the flames, to the flames”
 - ix. Luther engaged in a bold act of civil disobedience!!! He was forbidden from doing what God commanded, proclaiming the gospel of God’s free grace!!!
 - x. That is interesting... but...
- e. Does GCF have grounds? This brings us to the next subject...

3. GCF and civil disobedience.

a. *I’m going to ask several questions...*

b. **Should we civilly disobey the mandate not to sing?**

- i. Yes! Why? The Bible specifically commands us to sing to God and each other when we gather.

1. **Colossians 3:16 (ESV) — 16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

2. **Ephesians 5:18–19 (ESV) — 18** And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, **19** addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

- ii. Singing is explicitly commanded over 50 times in the Bible (1 Chr. 15:16; Ps. 5:11, 9:11, 100:1-5, 150:1-6, Heb. 2:12).
- iii. Many of these commands are given in the context of public worship.
- iv. Singing is fundamental to the church's worship and it has been for two thousand years. Along with preaching and the sacraments, singing is one of the chief elements of our liturgy.
- v. Application
 - 1. What God explicitly commands, we will not forbid... Since God explicitly commands us to sing, we will sing!
 - 2. This means that we don't sing, because that is what we have always done... we sing because God commands us to sing.
 - 3. Furthermore, we don't just sing because it is fun to sing...
 - 4. Singing is a means of grace that communicates the benefits of the gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - 5. Furthermore, singing is an act of discipleship. Not only do we sing to God, we sing to others for their edification. (Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:18-19).
 - 6. Historically, the Christian church has worshipped through preaching, sacraments, and singing, and that is not about to stop....
- vi. Since the governor is forbidding us from doing what God commands, we have decided to humbly disobey...

c. **Should we civilly disobey the mandate to wear masks and socially distance?**

- i. Some argue that wearing a mask and social distancing, makes it difficult to fully engage in the close fellowship encouraged in the following verses-
 - 1. **Romans 12:10 (ESV) — 10** Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.
 - 2. **Romans 16:16 (ESV) — 16** Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.
 - 3. **1 Corinthians 16:20 (ESV) — 20** All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. (see more on the holy kiss in 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26).
 - 4. I'm not advocating the holy kiss... but I am advocating cultural appropriate ways to show sincere love and affection. Some argue that this is hard to apply the spirit of these verses when you can't see someone's face.
- ii. In addition, social distancing makes it nearly impossible for the elders to abide by the principals of James 5:14-15, which tells them to anoint the sick with oil and pray for them...
- iii. With that said, the biblical case for disobeying these mandates is probably not as strong as the biblical case for disobeying the mandate prohibiting congregational singing.
- iv. Furthermore, some of the saints have excellent reasons for wearing masks and social distancing.

- v. As a result, we are leaving this decision up to the conscience of the individual. No one will be judged for wearing a mask and no one will be judged for not wearing a mask.

d. Should we civilly disobey the mandate to not meet in homes for small groups and discipleship groups?

- i. The most recent mandate from the governor's office says, "Religious services are limited to 25 percent of indoor occupancy limits, or no more than 200 people, whichever is fewer."
- ii. Some argue that GCF's home groups and discipleship groups qualify as religious services, since the governor says nothing about the nature, locations, or times of "religious services." If this is true, home groups and discipleship groups are free to meet in homes.
- iii. In light of this ambiguity, we are letting small groups and discipleship groups decide where to meet themselves. Some groups may decide to meet at the church, others may decide to meet on Zoom, while others may decide to meet in homes.
- iv. Wherever you decide to meet, please keep meeting. Biblical fellowship is a *crucial* aspect of spiritual growth.
- v. BTW... Even if these groups did not qualify as "religious services" one could still make the biblical case that they should keep meeting.
- vi. Maybe you are wondering... yeah, but...

e. Is any of this *really* civil disobedience?

- i. We live in a constitutional republic. In a constitutional republic the highest law of the land is not a police chief, a governor, a mayor, or the president of the United States. The highest law of the land is the U.S. Constitution.
- ii. The First Amendment of the U.S. constitution says,
 - 1. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."
- iii. Historically, the "free exercise" clause of the First Amendment has been interpreted to mean that churches are free to gather for worship as they see fit, without limitations or restrictions. As a result, some argue that it is unconstitutional for a local magistrate to tell Christians how to worship, when to sing, what to wear on their faces, or where to stand in proximity to other worshippers. In light of this, one can argue that participation in congregational singing this Sunday, without masks, is not a violation of Romans 13.

f. How does individual conscience factor into civil disobedience?

- i. The book of Romans sheds some light on this-

1. **Romans 14:5 (ESV) — 5** One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.
2. **Romans 14:14 (ESV) — 14** I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.
3. **Romans 14:23 (ESV) — 23** But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

- ii. In Romans 14, Paul argues that we must obey our consciences. Therefore, if you are not convinced from Scripture that you have biblical grounds for disobeying the governor’s mandates, you must obey the governor’s mandates.
- iii. Said another way, we must abide by the laws unless we are convinced from Scripture that we have grounds for disobeying those laws.

1. Apply this to masks...

- iv. Our overall posture must be a posture of humble submission, unless we are convinced from Scripture alone that we have grounds to disobey the laws.
- v. *I get what you are saying about civil disobedience, but isn't it unloving to meet and sing on the Lord's day, since you may spread Covid? This brings us to the fourth subject...*
- vi. *First, the Bible and civil authority*
- vii. *Second, the Bible and civil disobedience*
- viii. *Third, GCF and civil disobedience*

4. The Bible and Christian love.

- a. We care deeply about the health and safety of every human being, especially the weak and vulnerable. Furthermore, Covid-19 is a real disease that has very tragically ended thousands of lives.
 - i. Yet, the most recent data indicates that the vast majority of Covid-19 patients survive. The World Health Organization recently stated that “the I.F.R (Infection Fatality Rate) is about 0.6 percent—which means that the risk of death is less than 1 percent.”³
 - ii. While each death is a tragedy, we don’t believe that the risk of death is high enough to forbid corporate singing or cancel services. If circumstances change, our perspective may change.
 - iii. What if the hospitals get overwhelmed? We need to keep an eye on this... and continue to evaluate what we are doing.

³ From the New York Times “The Pandemic’s Big Mystery: How Deadly Is the Coronavirus?” by Donald G. McNeal Jr., Article updated Oct. 29th, 2020.

- iv. If anyone is concerned about health and safety, we strongly encourage them to watch our Sunday worship service from home. No one will be judged if they stay home due to health concerns.
- b. Motivated by Christian love, we want to keep worshipping. People do not thrive when they can't meet with the saints for worship. We believe it would be unloving to keep the saints from gathering to sing!!!
- c. Furthermore, motivated by Christian love, we must fight for unity. The issues involved are complex, requiring knowledge of ethics, theology, the Bible, medicine, public policy, and constitutional law. We should not be surprised when intelligent, well informed, and discerning Christians disagree on how to respond to the current crisis. This crisis provides us with a wonderful opportunity to work especially hard at putting on love, patience, and kindness.
- d. Covid has been so discouraging, is there any hope? yes, this brings us to the last subject...

5. The Bible and Christian hope

- a. Maybe you are wondering, will the trials of 2020 ever end? Yes, we have hope.
- b. If you were asked to describe a Christian with one word, which word would you chose?
 - i. Forgiven is a great word
 - ii. Adopted is a great word
 - iii. Redeemed is a great word
 - iv. Justified is a great word
 - v. But how about hopeful???
 - vi. Hope should be one of the main emotions that characterize Christians. Why?
- c. The word hope is mentioned over 80 times in the NT. The concept of hope appears even more. let me read a few texts on hope...

d. **1 Peter 1:3–5 (ESV)** — **3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **4** to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, **5** who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

- i. Preach gospel....

e. **1 Peter 1:13 (ESV)** — **13** Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

f. **Romans 15:13 (ESV)** — **13** May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

- i. With hope we can survive anything....
 - 1. Hope allows POW's to survive cold, torture, and hunger...
 - 2. Hope allows athletes to punish their bodies
 - 3. Hope allows persecuted Christians to persevere
- ii. Without hope life is not worth living...

1. Hopelessness leads to despair which often leads to suicide.

g. Christians have hope...

- i. Someday all of our woes will be over
- ii. Someday there will be no more lock downs, no more Covid-19, and no more restrictions on worship.
- iii. Someday you will be in the new creation with a new body.
- iv. Until then, we can rejoice because we have hope.
- v. Lets pray...