

Message: On Legality & Morality

Preface:

Well, friends, we're back in our "Making Sense" series.

I do want to say: I really, really was blessed by our communion service last week, and if you were able to be a part of that: Thank you. We will have threefold communion again just before Easter, not in-service, but as a special service, and I look forward to it then, too.

Today, though, we're talking about legality and morality, and their intersection. We'll look at a famous passage from Romans 13, because if fights are going to break out on this topic, that's where they break out. We'll supplement what we see there with other passages, but not much. So I want to try to talk about it well, and roll with what we see.

And let me say this. It's an odd moment for the way Smoky Row connects with The Brethren Church, because I scheduled this topic a couple of months ago for today, and last week The Brethren Evangelist had two articles on what we're about to say today, one more specifically on it than another, both of which

Brenda helped write or just outright authored. So. I thought about just, you know, reading what they wrote, but...we gotta get our money's worth.

Let's pray!

Prayer:

On Legality & Morality: Obligated

So the question that we'll circle around this morning is the relationship between what's legal and what's moral, and what a Christian is obligated to live up to with regard to morality and legality.

What does a Christian have to do when it comes to the law? And why should we do it?

And this isn't, you know, theoretical. We're continually faced with people who break the law, or break the rules, because they're convinced it's the right thing to do. Right? This makes the news.

On Legality & Morality: Scripts

I mean, there are lawbreakers who are breaking the law because of any number of evil reasons, things that are immoral by any standard. But we hear all the time

about people who are arrested because they broke this or that law, and their reasons for doing so were, as far as they were concerned, in line with a higher law, a moral law that the legal system didn't recognize.

And yet most of us learn very early that it's bad guys who get arrested, not good guys. And by the time we're adults, an automatic leap is made: those who arrest are the good guys, those who get arrested are the bad guys. Laws are always good, and those who break them are always bad. Alternatively, we come to believe, for all sorts of legitimate and illegitimate reasons, that it is the law-makers are all bad, that we are allowed to be a law unto ourselves, do as we wish, and lawbreaking is a good thing, sometimes heroic.

On Legality & Morality: Inherited Ambivalence

And this gets doubly confusing for us Americans, whether we consciously think about it or not, because we live in a country that got its start in revolution, by rejecting the laws that it said were unjust...but now disallows anything like what started it. When it comes to the rule of law, our identity is sort of like a parent telling his or her child, "Don't do what I did as a kid." And, frankly, kids always find that unfair. But I think this tension is built into what it means to be an

American: We like law when it's good for us--however we measure that--and we're always kind of ready to reject and ignore it--in various ways and degress--when we no longer perceive any personal benefit in it. It's as American as Apple Pie. Baseball. Revolution. (Wait! No.)

This ambivalence about law and who gets to break it when, and for what reasons, is a backdrop to much of what we read and listen and hear about in the news. So we have to talk about it.

Intersection:

At the intersection of legality and morality are a few different concerns. Ethics, of course. You can't talk about what's moral without talking about, well, what's moral. Allegiances are there. You can't talk about submission to the law without talking about submission in general, and to talk about submitting at all is to talk about who or what we pledge allegiance to.

And Jesus is there. Jesus stands at the intersection of legality and morality, because Jesus is the center of a Christian's allegiance and morality.

We've already looked at these things and concluded, simply, that our ethic, as Christians, is to be like Jesus, and our greatest allegiance is to God, who we must obey.

But let's turn to Romans, a passage that becomes the heart of conflict around this.

13:1-7: A Read Through

Paul says this:

1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of

possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

13:1-7: Questions

So. What do we do with this section of text? Because it gives rise to all sorts of questions.

How, for example, does this passage relate to the message of the book of Revelation, whose summary is something like "The government is demonic, and resist it at all costs?"

Of course: Revelation was written to particular churches, in their particular contexts, and Romans was written to a particular church in its own particular, "pre-Revelation-by-50-years" context.

We need to ask "What about Jesus?" Because Jesus ultimately allowed himself to be killed by "bad government," didn't he? By a ruler in Rome's pocket, who ruled a puppet government. It was a government that did, in fact, hold "terror for those who did right?"

What do we do with this passage, when in fact, if past Christians had “submitted to the authorities,” we would still have institutionalized slavery in America, we would not be our own country, but be ruled by Britain, and we would not be “the Brethren Church,” but probably Catholic.

Much of the history of the past 500 years--whether that’s “church history” or “history of the world”--has been shaped by Christians who decided not to submit to their authorities!

And of course, the early church didn’t either, when they were told that if they didn’t deny Christ they would be mauled by wild animals as afternoon entertainment.

13:1-7: A conundrum!

This is a real conundrum, you know? Because Paul says that the governing authorities are God’s servants, that they’ve been established by God, that they “bear the sword.”--a reference, it’s important to point out, toward state policing, law enforcement, not a reference to war.

“To bear the sword” is an idiom, a phrase that means “to have the ability and authority to punish.” And what Paul says here is nearly exactly what Peter writes, when he says “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor...or

to governors...who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”

But if we want to be people who take scripture seriously, we have to deal with this part of today’s passage. And the question that I want to pose, which this passage often gives rise to, is this:

“Why do Christians take part in civil disobedience when Paul seems to say here, don’t take part in civil disobedience?”

Question: “Why?”

“Why do Christians take part in civil disobedience when Paul seems to say here, don’t take part in civil disobedience?”

Some things:

We’re talking about Christian choices, here. Paul’s talking to God’s People, not those without faith. I don’t care this morning about a non-Christian perspective on this topic. I just don’t care.

And this, too: “civil disobedience” is what it sounds like. It’s the choice to not submit to, to in fact disobey, the civil authorities for some reason or another. The choice to disobey the civil authorities and the laws that go with civil life for some reason or another.

And “what that reason is” is what we need to talk about. We’re going to move a little quickly, here. So. Let me read a couple of verses again:

13:1-2: God’s Use of “Governing Authorities”

1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

Over the years, as we’ve looked at Romans, looked at Isaiah, are beginning to touch on now in our Genesis class, we’ve talked about God’s ability to raise up nations, groups of people, to use for His redemptive purposes in the world. God uses entire nations and people groups in his attempts to spread salvation from sin and death out into the world. Nearly always this is more a principle than a particular calling. That is, there is human society, and governments are a part of it.

This, it seems to me and others, is what Paul means when he says that “the one in authority is God’s servant.” We can’t think that somehow a governor or senator or king or city council member or president or queen is somehow an especially holy person, closer to

Jesus than the rest of us, with a greater measure of the Holy Spirit or something. Simply holding a civil office does not make someone holy or faithful. All it does is make someone a participant in the ongoing work God is doing as He uses governments and nations to promote not only his redemptive purposes in the world, but order itself.

Remember that the God who loves us is a God of order, not a God of chaos. The very fact that creation exists points this out. God is orderly, not chaotic or capricious. And governments are one of many ways God helps to promote orderliness in His world, and now and then reveal his redemptive purposes, too.

But Paul says here that if we rebel against what God has set up for his redemption purposes--that is, these governments that in their best cases promote good--if we rebel against them, then we'll bring judgment on ourselves.

And it's not God's judgment we'll bring on ourselves. This is so important to point out. It's not God's judgment we bring on ourselves. It's the judgment of the government that we rebel against. This is why Paul continues the way he does:

13:3-5: Terror For Wrongdoers

3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want

to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

Government: Good

Let's talk about this section positively. Should murderers be afraid of the one in authority? Yes, they should. Robbers should too. God uses government to help keep order, so not everyone is going around stealing and killing, right?

A government can provide for the general good and common welfare of the society that's being governed in this way. There is a place for good law and the support of it, and in this way, God uses good civil government to both position people to realize God's own goodness--if we didn't have the right to assemble peacefully, we wouldn't be gathered in this building right now--and minimize human rage and evil.

But good governments enforce good laws for all their citizens equally, whether they're rich or poor, loud or quiet, regardless of their wealth, or the language they

are most comfortable in, or the color of their skin, or the place they are from.

Answering The Question “Why?”

But there have been many Christians who have looked at their government and effectively said “In this situation, right and wrong have been reversed, and the ruling authorities hold terror for those who do right, not for those who do wrong.”

They’ve looked at their governments, these Christians, and have become convinced that the ruling authorities hold terror for those who do right, as far as Jesus' way of life is concerned, not those who do wrong. And they have decided, in light of this and with counsel from the church, to disobey their civil authorities.

“Why do Christians take part in civil disobedience when Paul seems to say don’t take part in civil disobedience?” The answer is because the state holds terror for those who do good; and Christians have to do good.

Disobedience In History:

This happened with the early Christians in Rome, right? They were being punished by the government simply for not worshiping Caesar--a thing they could not do and still remain faithful to Jesus. So they did not submit to the authorities, and were punished for it.

In the middle of the last century, Christians throughout the south and the north felt that it was inappropriate for the US government to deny rights to African Americans, and so they did not obey the laws of the government--laws like letting white people have the best seats on a bus. Before this, of course, Christians and churches all over the United States decided to disobey the government by helping runaway slaves to reach places of freedom, and let their convictions lead them to disobey the government to such an extent that war broke out.

And of course, early members of the Brethren Church were tossed into prison and had all their property seized by the state when they decided to disobey the government and be rebaptized as adults against the wishes of the state church.

Disobedience: Looking Around

These folks looked around them and saw that the rulers held terror for those who did right, and they feared the one in authority, because that one was no longer simply a servant for their good, but had become a servant against them and the neighbor they were called to love.

And this gets tricky. Murderers and thieves were still held in check by the law and those who enforced it, right? But at the same time, these Christians were also being punished as wrongdoers because they did not

submit to the laws of their governments, because those laws betrayed their highest law of obedience to Christ.

And we would say, I think, thank God that they did not submit to their authorities, because again, life would be very, very different and much more oppressive if they had not. We can't hate civil disobedience and love America at the same time. We started there.

I want to make some important points.

Important Point: Accepting Punishment

First of all, Christians who truly practice civil disobedience realize that they will likely be punished for it by their governments. This is important. When these examples I've mentioned did not submit to their governments, they were punished for it, and they knew that punishment was coming. They didn't fight against their punishments, they didn't run away, they simply allowed themselves to be punished; after all, the government was bearing the sword, was enforcing the law, and they were breaking it. They simply knew that they couldn't submit to their government, because their government had betrayed and left behind that "hold no terror for those who do right" way.

This is a very matter-of-fact perspective, isn't it? But it's critical, I think, if a Christian is to consider all that not submitting to the ruling authorities brings with it.

To resist the government that is bearing the sword and to try and avoid punishment--by lying, or running away, or something like this--it's like trying to have your cake and eat it too. It just doesn't work.

You have to submit to the punishment you receive for your civil disobedience.

Important Point: Testing Convictions

And remember, Paul says "It is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience." The punishment we've talked about--it's part and parcel when it comes to civil disobedience. That's what a government does to those who don't obey laws, it's one way in which order is maintained, but this issue of conscience is a critical one.

Because any Christian who practices civil disobedience--and this is happening all the time in all sorts of places, including our country, including in Ohio, just last week, for some of those who make up Radial Church in Canton--Any Christian who practices civil disobedience? They do so because they are convinced--by Scripture by the Holy Spirit and by a very wide sampling of the church--that the government has turned away from punishing the wrongdoer, and is a terror to those who do right, instead of those who do wrong.

And whenever people come to a conclusion like that, they can't do it lightly, can't do it as a matter of convenience. People come to these conclusions because they believe that the government is asking them to violate a high, biblical law that they are more obligated to than the law of the state. For example, that institutional slavery is wrong and to be resisted, or that denying Christ is something that they simply cannot do. They believe that to not act is to act against love. To not act is to act against love. They believe James, who says "If you know the good you ought to do, and don't do it, that's sin for you."

Important Point: Christlikeness!

And so importantly, Christian civil disobedience is non-violent. It has to follow the example set forth in Jesus, who "committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." Sin can't overcome sin; only good can. You can't beat sin by sinning more powerfully. That's like killing someone so they'll forgive you.

Christians who act in civil disobedience, who do it anonymously and violently, are not acting in line with Jesus, who allowed himself to be led like a lamb to the slaughter, and took punishment on the chin, who told his followers he was going to "go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt," and was.

Some Christians don't get this, and use their frustrations with government as a chance to act with

hate and anger and violence, rather than to take up a path of willing death. That's outside the bounds.

A Christian must, in their refusal to submit to government, do so in a way that is like Christ. This is critical. If you don't, you've sawn off the log you stand on, traded a place of conscience and moral certainty for the same bed sinners sleep in, and you'll lie with them.

Christians have often prayed that God would make their governments just and good, and we should pray for it, too, and pray for those who make up the "ruling authorities" and "law enforcers."

But the world as we know it is made up of Christians, who have rejected submitting to the authorities that rule over them, because to submit has seemed to them equivalent to denying Christ, rejecting love. And so they act with civil disobedience, and do it knowing that they'll be punished, accept the punishment that comes their way, they do this in a way that models Christ, the Prince of Peace.

13:6-7: Appropriately Give

Paul ends this section by saying this, and really, it just follows what he's said before:

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their

full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

We won't talk much about this bit. Let's just note Paul's insistence that we pay what we owe to whomever we owe it, whatever it might be.

And what he says after this naturally flows from this call to pay those what we owe them. Paul reminds us to pay the debts we owe, and tells us in the same breath, that we can never pay back the debt of love that we owe our faithful God. But God doesn't want us to pay our debt to Him; he wants us to pay it to one another, and never stop paying it. Paul calls us, echoing Jesus, to love one another as neighbors, as people who live in shared spaces. We're to live as if our lives are lived in a bright public place, where what we do is seen. And of course, to act in civil disobedience is always to act for our neighbor, because we believe that what the government, the state, is doing is not simply unjust for us, but destructive for them.

Conclusion: Convictions

Look, we each have to form convictions about what Paul says in Romans. Those needed tested against Jesus' own engagement with the State, against Peter's conviction that our obedience is to God before it is to

any human institution, and against Revelation's view that the government is evil embodied. These private convictions need to be formed in conversation with the public Church--the Scripture-centered, Spirit-filled, interpreting community.

We can't just react to what we hear or see when people resist the government; automatically either cheering them on or denouncing them. We can never celebrate violent revolution, because Jesus rejected it...even as we admit that we exist in a country that was founded by it. We have to hear each other's informed convictions on Christian civil disobedience, and not reject each other out of hand.

Conclusion: Questions

What are you willing to be punished for? What are you willing to submit to? Do you believe our government now is holding terror only for those who do wrong or for those who do right? This is a major, major question to answer. Because it's the question at the heart of why certain Christians will, as a matter of faith, peacefully break the law through acts of civil disobedience.

How does your commitment to Christ--the one whom we must be like in every possible way--affect the conviction we have about these questions? Because no matter what political situation we find ourselves in or under, our commitment to being like Jesus or unlike

him has always influenced our convictions on civil disobedience.

And, a last question: Can we both pray and take advantage of the many civil freedoms we have so that “those who rule over us” not only create an orderly world, but a just one? Are we willing to work iteratively and slowly toward that, or are we not? I respect both positions.

Ultimately, Romans 13 is a passage about our relationships with others in our society, with the neighbors around us in this government we all live under. And I suspect, at the end of the day, if we chose to respond with love all the time, to whatever came our way, we’d discover much more about what it means to live with Jesus at the intersection of legality and morality than we do now.