

Why Do I Have To Take Orders?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on May 17, 1992.
Scripture Lesson: Romans 13.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Carolyn Nystrom, in her studies in Romans for senior high students, invites high school students to rate themselves on their response to rules and regulation. I'd like each one of us to take this test this morning. You'll need a pen or pencil. You can use your bulletins to keep track of your scores. I want you to rate yourselves on a scale of 1 to 6 on how true or false the following statements are in your own life. The statements have to do with how well you respond to rules and regulations and authorities. Here we go.

True ~~False~~ is 1 False ~~True~~ is 6

- School (work) rules bug me; I ignore them if I can get away with it.
- I don't feel bound by picky laws like speed limits and "don't walk" signs.
- I wiggle out of as many family rules (like curfew, chores, helping with housework) as possible.
- I don't ask for the advice and instruction of elders in my church.
- I speak disrespectfully of government officials.
- I obey God's laws - but only those that seem practical for my situation.

Now add up your score to find your authority I.Q. If you scored between 6 and 12 points you're a rebel and you'll be required to hand in your sermon notes at the end of the service to the Session. If you scored between 13 and 18 points your trying to respect authority but it hurts. If you got between 19-24 points that's so-so. If you gave yourself between 25-30 points give your names to the nominating committee. You need to be an elder or deacon. If you got between 31 and 36 points I'm going to invite you to come forward to give your testimony.

In our Scripture lesson Paul talks to Christians about how they should respond to authority.

1. Paul tells us, first of all, in verse 1, "let every person be subject to the governing authorities." He goes on to tell us that Christians should pay both direct

and indirect taxes. We should also pay respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Christians also have the added responsibility of not only obeying the law, but loving one another. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Now I want you to make a list of all the governing authorities in your life. For example, if you're a young person your parents would be the most immediate governing authority in your life. If you're married, Paul tells us that husbands and wives are to be submissive to one another. Your boss or supervisor at work have authority over you. The laws of the commonwealth and nation have authority over us. When I see a police car behind me with the siren blowing and the gum ball machine on top flashing I recognize the authority of the policemen to pull me over.

And these aren't the only governing authorities. As a Christian I recognize God's Word in the Bible to have authority over me. If you're a member of the church you're under the authority of the session which can discipline members who resist the sessions authority. As a minister, I'm under the authority of the Presbytery which can discipline me if I resist its authority.

God doesn't rule over us directly. God uses parents, supervisors, public officials, laws, and elders to govern us. So, first of all, Paul tells us, "let every person be subject to the governing authorities."

2. Secondly, Paul gives three reasons why we're to obey.

a. He says we're to obey because these authorities have been instituted by God. When Paul wrote this he wasn't talking about a constitutional democratic

republic. He was talking about a great Imperial power. The Roman Emperor was the autocratic and heathen Nero who ~~was~~ later persecuted and crucified Christians, blaming them for a great fire that destroyed Rome. Paul was telling these early Christians that whatever their feelings might be as subject and conquered people, they owed the emperor the duty of obeying his laws and paying his taxes because it was God who ordained his office (Catherwood, *The Christian Citizen*, p. 26).

How does this apply to us today living in a democratic republic? For one thing, when Paul says that the authorities have been instituted by God he means that government is good and politics (which is "the science of the art of governing") is an honorable calling. A lot of people are cynical about politics and government. We talk about dirty politics. Some Christians, in fact, believe that government and politics are so dirty that Christians shouldn't be involved. But *politics and government* are instituted by God. Maybe our government would be a better if all citizens would get involved in the political process, become aware of the issues, vote, write to our representatives, and run for office. Government is good. It's instituted by God to provide for the good of all.

b. Another reason why we should obey is because, "those who resist will incur judgment." Now this reason has always played a big part in my life. I don't want to incur judgment. When my mother would tell me to practice the piano, cut the grass or shovel the snow I'd often rebel and want to resist. But my mother had a way of letting me know that disobedience wouldn't be prudent. If I drive the

speed limit it's because I don't want to get caught and pay a fine.

Resistance to the authorities that God has instituted incurs judgment. This happens at every level of authority. Children who disobey their parents can get seriously hurt. When husbands and wives aren't mutually submissive to one another judgment is incurred in the way of dysfunctional family life. When we don't follow rules at work, like wearing a hard hat in construction zones, judgment can be brutal. The law requires that we obey the speed limits and wear seat belts. How many lives would be saved if those rules were strictly obeyed?

c. But Paul gives a third reason for being subject to the governing authorities. In verse 5, "One must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience." We should be subject to the governing authorities, not because we're afraid we might get caught, but because our conscience tells us to obey. We wear the seatbelt and drive the speed limit even if we aren't afraid of *being caught*. We obey our parents even when we think we can get away with disobedience because our conscience, informed by Scripture, tells us to obey. We obey, not out of compulsion, but because ~~we are~~ ^{our} conscience makes us free and willing to obey.

But this raises a question in my mind. What if my conscience tells me that a law is unjust? What if your parents tell you to cheat or to steal? What if your boss tells you to falsify business records? What if any authority tells me to do something that I know, on the basis of God's word, is wrong?

If this happens I believe we need to pray hard about what to do. We need

also to read and study and meditate upon the Scripture, by ourselves and with others, so we're sure about what God's revealed will is. We should also share our conscientious concerns with fellow Christians and seek their guidance. It's appropriate for us, as members of the church, to seek the guidance of the elders, presbytery or even the General Assembly. These also are governing authorities under whom God has placed us and to which we are to be subject. But rarely should we ever disobey a law simply on the basis of our own individual and personal feelings. It's a great evil when everyone does what is right in their own eyes, but there are times when conscience requires us to obey God rather than God's servants.

Take the state for example. The state is the servant of God, Paul tells us. The state is not God, it's a servant of God. What if the state requires me to render to Caesar that which belongs only to God? Shortly after Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome the Emperor began to claim to be God. He began to require everyone in the empire to make a public sacrifice to the Emperor once a year as an act of worship. Christians refused to do this. They said, with Peter in the book of Acts, "We ought to obey God rather than men." When the aged Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna refused to sacrifice and confess Caesar as Lord the Roman centurion begged him to comply. But the Bishop replied, "For eighty six years I have worshiped Christ as Lord and he has never done me any wrong. How can I now deny him?" And with that Polycarp was burned at the stake.

What about today? What if our conscience outweighs our fear of

punishment? Take war for instance. Sometimes Christians conscientiously object to the taking of human life. They don't refuse military service because they're cowards. They refuse for conscience sake.

I'm thinking of the commencement speaker at Kay's graduation from Messiah College. He was a conscientious objector during WW2. He was a man of deep Christian faith whose understanding of the Bible made him unwilling to kill for his country. He was, however, willing to die to prevent the lives of others from being taken. What he did is instructive for us. He didn't resist the draft. He complied but applied for alternative service where it would be possible for him to save lives rather than to take life. As a result, the military authorities placed him on the top of warehouses in London during the fire bombing raids. When firebombs were dropped on the warehouse he had to go around with a fire extinguisher trying to put out the fire. He was also given the job of disarming bombs that fell in the city without exploding. Some of his fellow COs died when these bombs blew up in their faces. He was no coward. His conscientious objection actually placed him in greater danger than many combatants. What impressed me most about this man was that he didn't resist the governing authorities but sought to conform himself to their will in such a way that would not compromise his Christian beliefs.

Most of us are probably not conscientious objectors but we can still learn from this man's example that the state is not the highest authority with whom we have to deal. The government is instituted by God but remains a servant of God, a servant which can be a disobedient servant.

We need to have the kind of church that nurtures it's members to know the Word of God so well that

- (1) every member sees ^{our} ~~them~~ themselves, not as autonomous individuals, subject to no one, ^{doing whatever we want when we want,} but ~~members~~ ^{people} who recognize and are subject to the governing authorities in their lives, children to parents, husbands and wives to one another, ^{church members to Elders,} citizens to laws and lawfully elected public servants

- (2) every member knows why we should obey: because all authority is instituted by God; because disobedience carries with it consequences; but also our conscience tells us that it's right to obey even when we have no fear of being caught.

And, finally, if we're ever faced between choosing between obeying a disobedient servant or obeying the master we will do what is right no matter what the consequences.

Let us pray: O Lord our Governor, whose glory is in all the world: We commend this nation to your merciful care, that, being guided by your Providence, we may dwell secure in your peace. Grant to the President of the United States, the Governor of this Commonwealth, and to all in authority, wisdom and strength to know and do your will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness, and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve this people in your fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.