

# LESSON 226

## CIVIL OBEDIENCE

Related Scripture: Psalm 2

**KEY VERSE:** "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work."—Titus 3:1.

Lesson Scripture: Romans 13:1-8;  
1 Peter 2:11-20

### Introduction:

So-called civil disobedience, though practiced and endorsed by some pseudo-religious leaders, is neither civilized nor Christian. Government can be maintained only with the consent or submission of the governed, whether that submission be voluntary or forced. The Bible teaches us who are children of God to obey established authorities in this world.

A well established principle of authority is that lower authorities must yield to the higher. So in this country local units of government have their authority limited by the state, and the states (since the Civil War) are under the higher authority of the federal government. But within the proper limits of its authority, even the lowest level of government is to be obeyed, subject only to appeal to a higher authority.

Now, our highest Authority is God, the Creator of all; and He tells us plainly in His word to obey the authorities that exist, "the powers that be." This is the substance of our present lesson. The question of possible conflict between human authority and the commands of God as our highest Authority will be considered next week.

This week's lesson may be outlined as follows:

1. Obedience Ordained, Romans 13:1-4
  - a. Government of God, 1, 2
  - b. Praise and punishment, 3, 4
2. Obedience Owed, Romans 13:5-8
  - a. Conduct and conscience, 5, 6
  - b. Discharge of debts, 7, 8
3. Obedience Ordered, 1 Peter 2:11-17
  - a. Serving our souls, 11, 12
  - b. Serving our society, 13, 14
  - c. Serving our Savior, 15-17
4. Obedience Offered, 1 Peter 2:18-20
  - a. Faith and fear, 18
  - b. Faith and fruit, 19, 20

### Notes on the Printed Text:

#### Obedience Ordained, Romans 13:1-4.

Both the institution of human government and the obedience of people to their government are ordained of God. Various kinds of government exist by divine appointment or permission, but there is no place for anarchy unless it be in the solitude of a desert island.

#### Government of God, 1, 2.

That men in positions of governmental authority may be very wicked is an undoubted fact. Even so, "there is no power but of God," and God's people are commanded to acknowledge their official authority. Remember that when Paul wrote these words he was a Roman citizen, under a corrupt, heathen, dictatorial government.

No matter what may be the nature of the established government at any time or place, its existence is part of the divine arrangement; and we have no right to resist or oppose God's "ordinance" or arrangement merely because we dislike it. If we do resist, we should expect to be punished with the legal penalty of the law we disobey; and this is the meaning of "damnation" in this context.

#### Praise and Punishment, 3, 4.

Exceptions may appear here and there, but generally speaking God and government are on the same side on great moral issues. The scripture here considers not the exceptions but the rule. Generally speaking, "rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil." So far as this is true, Christian citizens ought to earn praise for being good citizens, and avoid the crimes which would bring upon them just punishment.

#### Obedience Owed, Romans 13:5-8.

However, we ought not to be good citizens only to keep out of jail. An enlightened conscience reminds us that our lives belong to our Redeemer; we owe to Him, and therefore to whatever authorities He may choose, the obedience that He commands.

#### Conduct and Conscience, 5, 6.

So conscience demands conduct befitting children of the most High King. To obey Him we must obey His "ministers" in government, even paying "tribute" or taxes to support what may be or become an oppressive government. In case of revolution or of war between governments, the Christian conscience demands loyalty to his own people or government so long as that government continues to function.

On a higher level, God's people are citizens of a heavenly kingdom and are not primarily concerned with worldly conflicts between rival powers. But those people, including religionists and politicians, who wish to retain the benefits and protection of their government while serving the interests of its enemies are, in a plain word, traitors; their talk of conscience is only hypocrisy; historically and scripturally they merit the utmost condemnation and contempt from men and from God.

#### Discharge of Debts, 7, 8.

"Tribute" and "custom" here are different kinds of taxes. These are obligations which the Christian must meet like anyone else. "Fear to whom fear" and "honor to whom honor" remind us of our obligation to do our part to maintain law and order and to show a proper respect for authority.

"Owe" in verse 8 is a present imperative in the original; the meaning is, "Do not keep on owing," or, in other words, "Pay your debts." The one debt that we can never get done paying is love; in genuine love we discharge all other debts.

#### **Obedience Ordered, I Peter 2:11-17.**

Again we are reminded that obedience is a divine order which, while designed for our good, is not left to our choice. Our Lord was crucified under the authority of the Roman government, and according to tradition both Paul and Peter were put to death by that same government because of their faith; but the apostles agree with their Master in telling us to be submissive to constituted authority.

#### **Serving Our Souls, 11, 12.**

Our duty as "strangers and pilgrims" in this world with reference to government is first of all to govern ourselves. Spiritually we belong to a better world, and our own fleshly nature is our own worst enemy. Fleshly lusts will not let us live in peace; they "war against the soul," and in abstaining from these desires of the flesh we serve the best interests of our own souls.

Good conduct is more than abstaining from evil; on the positive side it must include "good works." In a very real sense, we serve and enrich our own souls in good conduct which will compel false accusers of our present life to "glorify God in the day of visitation" for divine judgment.

#### **Serving Our Society, 13, 14.**

"For the Lord's sake" we are to submit ourselves "to every ordinance of man." This is the best way to serve our society. In what we call a "free" country we may have some voice in forming and changing laws under which we live, but honest Christians cannot be lawless. We cannot join the enemies of society to incite disorder and disruption; we serve our society as law-abiding citizens.

#### **Serving Our Savior, 15-17.**

Hypocritical agitators who quote, misquote, and misapply scripture for their own revolutionary purposes have apparently cut these and many other verses out of their Bibles. Here is an excellent statement of God's will for His people in their human relationships. We serve our Savior, simply by obeying His word; not by trying to take things into our own hands, as did Judas Iscariot.

#### **Obedience Offered, I Peter 2:18-20.**

"Servants" here were probably household slaves, but whether they were owned or hired we see again the principle of submitting to authority. The mention of buffeting or cuffing in verse 20 makes it almost certain that the reference is to a condition of slavery.

#### **Faith and Fear, 18.**

Even in slavery, we are to fear God rather than man. Faith in God, faith that He is the ultimate Judge, will keep a slave submissive to his legal master, regardless of whether that master is "good and gentle" or "froward" (crooked).

#### **Faith and Fruit, 19, 20.**

Continuing the thought, the test of faith is not doing the easy and pleasant thing, but in remaining obedient when obedience is hard. Acceptable fruit is produced when the tree survives drouth and flood alike and still yields the fruit required. (Gal. 5:22, 23; Ps. 1:3.)

#### **Key Verse:**

"Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work."  
—Titus 3:1.

Paul's command to Titus concerning the instruction and admonitions needed by the people of God is still fitting. The more lawless the time, the greater the need for God's people to fulfill the law; the more the world is filled with wickedness, the more need there is for every good work by the children of God.