

The Bible On Rioters and Protesters

By Elder David Pyles

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. – Rom 13:1-2

This is probably the most famous of all verses in the Bible commanding obedience to civil authorities. It is a very needful commandment in these times in which many streets of America are filled with protestors and rioters. While I am glad Americans have freedom to peacefully protest, the fact that a person has a right to do a thing does not imply it is the right thing to do. I am doubtful it will prove the right thing toward correcting present problems. History will show that such protests seldom yield the best results. Even the highly glamorized Boston Tea Party was opposed by most Americans at the time, including George Washington, who thought things should have been handled in a more civil way.

When this verse says all higher powers are ordained of God, it does not mean that God approves all individuals who occupy seats of authority; rather, it means that the seats of authority are themselves a thing of God. God has ordained the office though not necessarily the actions of the man who occupies it. God is not the author of confusion (1Cor 14:33, Js 3:13-18), and He therefore does not approve anarchy. This being the case, the office is to be honored and obeyed, even if we do not like the person who occupies it (Mt 23:2-3). Refusal to obey will be met with Divine judgment. Be sure that at the time the apostle wrote this, nearly all the ongoing authorities were hostile to Christians, but Paul said, “*Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake,*” (vs 5). That is, he commanded Christians to be obedient to these adversarial authorities not only to avert their wrath but also that Christians might have assured consciences that they had obeyed God and averted His judgment. This clearly implies it is apt to be more important to God that there be law and order in our society than that we get our way with the government.

Many people today evidently think this commandment does not pertain to elected offices, but rebellion against an elected office is in fact even worse. The offender has not only broken God's commandment to obey authority but has also broken an implicit agreement with his fellow citizen that election is to decide who holds the office. It is bad enough to be a rebel; it is even worse to be both a rebel and one who breaks agreements. For the same reason, it is very disingenuous to glorify these modern protests by comparing them to what happened in the American Revolution. It is a very different thing to rebel against your own elected government than to rebel against a foreign government from across an ocean that has imposed its will upon you. When the Bible says to obey authorities, it does not mean foreign ones.

Paul then added:

For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. – Rom 13:4

This says what should be obvious to any thinking mind, namely, that all honest and civil people are better off for having civil authorities, including especially police officers. Paul said, "*he beareth not the sword in vain.*" Of course, by "*sword*" he means a weapon. The reason he does not bear his weapon in vain is that "*he is the minister of God.*" That is, God gives him the right to bear the weapon and the right to use it against offenders.

Those who rebel against civil authorities are characterized by the Bible in very condemning terms. They are called "presumptuous" and "self-willed" and "brute beasts," and the Bible also warns they will be destroyed (2Pet 2:9-12, Jude 8-13) because the hand of God will be against them in enforcing it.

James said, "*But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish,*" (Js 3:14-15). When he says, "*glory not, and lie not against the truth,*" he means that one should not represent the war they are waging as being something that it isn't. All men like to glory in their wars as being holy wars, but in fact very few of them have proven to be such.

When all the devastation is done, both sides are far more apt to appear as the dupes of the devil. James then added, “*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace,*” (vss 7-8). The last sentence is especially important. It says that when we and others must eat of the fruits of our own doings, the good fruit will be what we had sown in peace, not in rioting and rebellion.

There are of course times when different authorities can give us conflicting commandments. When this happens, it is understood that the highest authority must prevail. The highest of all authorities is God, who is also the foundation of all our rights, as is expressed both in the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. However, I think most Americans have forfeited their right to appeal to His authority inasmuch as they have effectively renounced the authority of His word. When appealing to God, this cannot be “god” as we imagine Him to be or as we wish Him to be, but as He has revealed Himself to be in His word. Appeal to a god we have contrived in our own imaginations is really appeal to self. This brings us back to anarchy. The upshot of all this is that any person claiming to be a Christian should obey civil authorities unless they have a clear and conclusive biblical case against them.