

SILENCE THE IGNORANCE

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic continues, and the United States remain in a state of emergency. Some states are removing some restrictions, but others are maintaining them. Some counties ignore their governors orders, and some county sheriffs will not enforce them. Some state officials have restricted churches, forbidding them from holding service. Knox County in the state of Tennessee, after banning church services, allowed churches to resume, but forbade them from celebrating holy communion, stating, “The physical taking of communion/sacrament should not be performed due to the serial breaking of physical distancing across a congregation. Consider guiding parishioners in how to connect with the spiritual aspects of these practices during this phase.” The county guidelines did not consider holy communion to be part of, as they put it, ‘core worship.’ This would have been no offense to some Christians. Fortunately for other Christians, the governor of Tennessee overruled the county’s restriction. Christians agree that they ought never to disobey God, but, sadly, they do not agree on whether they ought to comply with other orders. Some Christians believe that churches ought to comply with government other orders, and, although some churches have held drive-in services and streaming services, some have not held service at all. The Scriptures do address the matter of the Christian’s obedience to the civil authorities.

It is important to understand from the start that civil authorities exist because of sin. When God created the first man, there were no civil authorities. God made Adam, and then made his wife, and Adam was head of his wife. There was no civil government. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, so God expelled them from the garden of Eden into the field, and Adam was condemned with difficulty to till the ground outside. God cut them off from the life that is in Him, and they became dead in trespasses and sin. They were guilty before God, and their natures were sinful. Eve bore Adam children, and their children were sinful and guilty. Yet, there was still no civil government. Adam’s first son, Cain, killed his second son, Abel. This was such a heinous act, that, as God drove Adam from the garden into the field which with hard labor yielded to him fruit, so he drove Cain from the field into the desert where the ground would yield to him no fruit. God banished him from his family, and condemned him to wander as a vagabond in the earth. Cain lamented his sentence, and he feared an avenger, someone who would kill him because he killed Cain. He said to the Lord:

My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.” (Genesis 4:13, 14)

So, God offered Cain protection. He said to him, “Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” (Genesis 4:15) Cain’s act of murder was the beginning of violence on the earth. He killed Abel his brother, and another might avenge Abel by killing him, and so it would go in the world. So, God said that, if a man killed Cain, a complete vengeance would be taken on that man. God made a warning sign so that no one would kill him. God protected Cain the murderer.

Violence continued on the earth, however, and it became so great that God would suffer it no longer. The Scriptures say, “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.” (Genesis 6:11, 12) Because it was so corrupt, and men were so violent, God would destroy the world. He told Noah what

he would do, and He told Noah to make an ark so that his family and two of every kind of animal could be saved. Noah built the ark, and when his family and the animals were safely aboard, God brought a great flood, and drowned every living thing. About one year after the flood rains began, Noah and the rest disembarked. Noah built an altar, and on it he offered to the Lord burnt offerings. God's anger was assuaged, and He promised never again to destroy every living thing, and He gave the rainbow as the sign of His covenant with Noah and his descendants. Noah stood as the new head of mankind, and God said to him:

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things. But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat. And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man. And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein. (Genesis 9:1-7)

Just as God had commanded Adam and his descendants to be fruitful and multiply, so He commanded Noah and his descendants. Moreover, God gave man permission to eat animals, as well as plants, but He forbade them eat meat with blood in it. Finally, God requires vengeance in the case of murder. If a man is killed by beast or by man, then God requires the life of that beast or of that man. Moreover, God has commanded men to take their lives. For one man to take the life of another is a great sin, because every man is made in the image of God. No man may take the life of a man without God's permission. To do so is murder, and is expressly forbidden in the Seventh Commandment. God is Lord of life and death. If one man without God's permission takes another man's life, then that man must die, and God has commanded men to put him to death. Cain killed Abel, but God protected him from vengeance. Yet, because all men were violent, God finally killed them all with a flood. After the flood, men would still be violent; the nature of man did not change. So, God commanded men to put murderers to death. God has given man permission to kill animals when it is beneficial for him. However, a man is not an animal; he is made in the image of God. Because a man is made in the image of God, neither man nor animal may kill him. If one man kills another, then men must put the killer to death. Of course, to murder a man is to kill him with premeditated malice. Such an act is worthy of death. Yet, one man might kill another without premeditated malice; he might kill unintentionally. If a man killed unintentionally, then he could flee to city of refuge, and there find sanctuary; the dead man's avenger could not touch him there. (Numbers 35:6-34; Deuteronomy 4:41-43; 19:1-14; Joshua 20:1-9)

The law of Moses includes a law of retaliation. It states:

And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death. And he that killeth a beast shall make it good; beast for beast. And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again. And he that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death. (Leviticus 24:17-21)

Taking a man's life is the most severe punishment, and God's giving man the right to take a life is the foundation of civil government. The law of Moses commanded the death not only of murderers; it prescribed death for some other sins, the worst sins. It prescribed death for idolatry, for blasphemy, for Sabbath-breaking, for dishonoring parents, and for adultery. The law prescribed death, not for all sins, but for certain sins against God, and against man.

Shortly before Moses died, He sang a song, and in his song the Lord says, "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence." (Deuteronomy 32:35) God, not man, exacts revenge and pays back to them that have done wrong.

Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, put the law of retaliation in perspective. He said:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:38-45)

Jesus certainly did not contradict the law of Moses, for He said in the same sermon, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." (Matthew 5:17) He did not teach that the Christian should allow men to take advantage of him. That would be foolish, and would indulge men in their sinful desires. Neither did he teach that the Christian should not be concerned with justice and restitution. God concerns Himself with those things, and so does every righteous man. Rather, Jesus put the law of retaliation in perspective. He, in his style of hyperbole, taught that the Christian ought to do whatever he can to be at peace with men, and, if he is wronged, never to take his own revenge. The Christian should not hate his enemies, but rather love them. This does not mean that the Christian must have affection for his enemies, but that he must do good to his enemies. He should not repay his enemies in kind, be rather be kind to his enemies. This is what God does. God loves His enemies in that He does good to them. So, God's children do good to their enemies.

Saint Paul explains this in his epistle to the Romans. He writes:

Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14-21)

Following the teaching of Jesus, the apostle tells Christians, not to persecute their persecutors, but rather to bless them; not to pay evil to them that do evil, but rather to do good to them. He tells them not to take their own revenge, but to leave vengeance to God. He appeals to the song of Moses which says, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” He does not stop there, however; he continues:

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. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 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. (Romans 13:1-4)

Saint Paul here explains the purpose of civil authorities, and why Christians should be subject to them: civil authorities are God’s servants that exact His revenge on them that do evil. The civil authorities have been established for this purpose, and they have been given the authority to take a life for it. The Christian is not to take his own revenge, but to let God avenge him. God avenges in various ways, and one of those ways is by the civil authorities. This is why the Christian is to submit to the civil authorities. God has not authorized the civil authorities to do whatever they think is good for people. Their purpose is narrowly defined as God’s avenger.

Of course, Saint Peter teaches the same. He wrote:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. (1 Peter 2:13-17)

God has established the civil authorities for the purpose of punishing them that do evil, and so the Christian ought to submit himself to the civil authorities for this reason. The Christian ought not to flout the authorities in the discharge of their proper duties, but rather submit to them. The Christian confesses Jesus as King of kings, and Lord of Lords; yet, he must subject himself to the civil authorities, as they have been ordained by God. The Christian confesses Jesus as Lord, but this does not exempt him from submission to the civil authorities. If the Christian resists proper civil authority, then that authority will have reason to accuse. If the Christian pays respect to proper authority, then he will receive praise from the same. Christians should give the civil authorities no ground for believing that they are rebellious and insubordinate. When Saint Paul and Saint Silas were in Thessalonica, they made many converts among the Gentiles, to the consternation of the Jews. When the Jews could not find Paul and Silas, they dragged Jason and other Christians before the civil authorities, and said, “These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.” (Acts 17:6, 7) This is the same charge the Jews brought against Jesus at the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate. They said, “We found this

fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King.” (Luke 23:2) After Pilate examined Jesus, he said to the Jews, “Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him.” (Luke 23:14) The charge against Jesus was false, however, as Pilate himself judged. The Christian should never give anyone ground for saying that he does not recognize the civil authorities.

The Christian ought to submit to the authorities. Yet, there will be occasion for resistance. Daniel the prophet is a good example. When Darius king of Persia appointed Daniel over the presidents and princes of Persia, they tried to find some ground of complaint against him concerning the kingdom, but they found none. Knowing that Daniel’s loyalty was to God, they said, “We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God.” So, they set a trap for him. They advised the king:

King Darius, live for ever. All the presidents of the kingdom, the governors, and the princes, the counsellors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. (Daniel 6:6-8)

The king agreed, and he signed it into law. The decree was only temporary, and would expire after thirty days. The Scriptures say:

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. (Daniel 6:10)

Daniel openly defied the king’s audacious decree. Daniel, knew the decree was temporary, and he might have let it pass. He might have done nothing about it, but the king had no authority to forbid a man to pray to God, for thirty days, or for thirty minutes. There was an important principle at stake, namely that even civil authorities must know their place, and that no man may tell God’s people how they may serve God.

Let us recognize the rightful authority of civil government. Let us understand what God has ordained the civil authorities to do. Let us always remember that our loyalty is to Jesus, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Now unto the blessed Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen.