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The Powers That Be

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Series: The Mind of Christ

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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In two adjoining courtrooms, heated debates, deep emotions, and suspenseful proceedings were the order of the day. The judges were considered among the best. The jurors had been selected with the greatest of care. Outside, the press waited with equal anticipation for the results of each trial.

But the outcome would be determined in a totally different way. The first case was about a man accused of murder. There was no doubt that murder was wrong. Counsel on both sides agreed on that. (They agreed on little else.) No, the issue wasn't whether or not murder was legal. The issue was whether or not this man had committed the crime. If it was proved that he did, he was guilty.

In the adjoining chamber, the lawsuit was equally compelling, but the issues were different. It was a dispute over whether or not a certain clause in a government contract worth millions of dollars had been broken. The issue wasn't cut and dried. It wasn't a matter of whether or not the accused had done what he had done. He freely admitted to that. The issue was whether or not the law actually applied in this case.

Both were serious matters. But in the one case, the law was clear, the verdict hinged on proving the law had been broken. In the other case, the verdict hinged on proving that the law applied.

That's not surprising. Man's legal system grew out of the law of God. However perverted and ungodly it may have become, there is no doubt about its roots. Modern law began with God's law. It's no wonder then, that there are still two kinds of problems facing man in this matter of obedience to the law of God.

1- THE ISSUE OF ABSOLUTES

Absolutes are God's laws. They are in concrete. They have been written to all of His people for all time. When you violate an absolute, the issue isn't whether or not the law applies, but whether or not you have been disobedient. God's law forbids lying. If you lie, you sin against a God whose nature is truth. Because that is His nature, He cannot change that law. *It is*

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an absolute. No judge or jury will have to meet to determine whether or not lying is wrong. The only issue will be: Did you or did you not lie? It doesn't mean God won't forgive you. He will (if you ask Him). But the results of that lie, the reaping of that sin, may exact a price.

If "be anxious for nothing" is an absolute (and it is) then never will worrying be a justified act of behavior. God has said

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; (Philippians 4:6 NKJV)

Any time you stop praying and start worrying, you exit the realm of God's peace and enter the realm of sin. No angel from Heaven needs to come to earth and tell you that.

No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deuteronomy 30:14 NIV)

You are without excuse. God made spiritual laws just as man has made physical laws and they are irrevocable. Cause and effect are always in place. Worry and you lose the peace. Pray and the peace returns. Law. Absolutes. Security. But it's not always that simple.

2- THE ISSUE OF BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Principles are the guidelines for living that grow out of God's absolutes, but which must be individually applied using Scripture as the guidebook and the Holy Spirit as the guide. To repeat the illustration we used in the last study, an Old Testament law forbade plowing with an ox and a donkey tied to the same harness. It was called "unequal yoking." The process of good agriculture wasn't God's intent, though it might have been a side benefit. The issue was that God was painting a picture of what happens when two dissimilar animate objects try to perform a basic function in harness together. Because they were not designed to be yoked together, their efforts would be unfruitful. As an example, the children of Israel were told not to "yoke" themselves to the unbelieving nations round about them. Whenever they did, they suffered.

Enter Jesus Christ. He did not void that law, though you and I are not likely to harness an oxen or a donkey real soon. (Politically speaking, you might apply it to elephants and donkeys, but that's probably stretching it.) So Jesus came and

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gave His church a series of principles to follow, based on that law. The principles are those about “unequal yoking”.

A believer marrying an unbeliever is in absolute violation of that law. Scripture says that. In our society, that would virtually prohibit young Christians from dating non-Christians, since dating is, Scripturally speaking, nothing more than a prelude to marriage. But there are other issues that are not quite as clear, and are not spelled out in the Bible. Most people feel that this principle applies to partnerships, for example. I certainly do. But the Bible does not spell this out. So it is up to you and to me to define “unequal yoking” in the business realm, and come to a conclusion based on the decision we have to make. Is the other person in harness with us? Are we certain of their spiritual relationship? Is there evidence of their integrity? A sub-principle, remember, says,

Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?

(Amos 3:3 NKJV)

Is it a 50-50 partnership? Are the responsibilities clearly defined? Will there be moral violations required if the other partner chooses to do things I don't approve of? Will I have to violate financial absolutes to do this?

You must stop and apply the principles, ask the Spirit to direct you, pray without ceasing, perhaps seek godly counsel, and wait for a clear word from God. “When in doubt, don't,” is a good interim rule. But the Bible does not say, “John, don't go into the plumbing business with Fred.” It gives you principles, and leaves it to you to seek God's mind. Ignore the principles and you are certain to fail. But even if the principles lead you to the right decision, don't then create your own absolute and impute it to others. This is a great source of dissension and condescension in the Christian community. A group goes to a seminar or joins with others involved in specific activities to which they feel called as Christians. In that seminar, for instance, a principle that may be close to the heart of the speaker may be articulated. Those in attendance may be quickened in their spirits, and convicted that this is important to them, too. They pray about it, and they decide to take action.

Wonderful. The problem comes, however, when they then begin to consciously or unconsciously gauge the spiritual temperature of their Christian friends by how they respond to

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that same principle. It may not be as important to them. They may not see it the same way. It may not appear to them that it applies to them. Instead of praising God for His insight into their own lives, those who attended become a “clique”, huddling together for strength and feeling somewhat super-spiritual for having come to grips with and become obedient to their new-found conviction. The result is unnecessary guilt on the part of other believers, pride on the part of the group in question, and dissension in the body of Christ. The problem? They came to grips with a principle and tried to turn it into an absolute.

If you can learn the difference between absolutes and principles you are on your way to abiding in that wonderful field of spiritual fruit known as the balanced Christian life. You won't be trapped in the mine field of legalism, trying to find a black and white answer to every issue, thus voiding the need to seek the face of God; but neither will you fall into the trap of “experiential leading” where you make your choices based on “how you feel” and “what doors are opened”, rather than on what God says through His word as applied by His Spirit.

We will look more at this matter of absolutes and principles as we proceed through our study of obedience. One thing is for sure. There is an answer in God's Word for every question. It may be in the form of an absolute statement, or it may be in the form of a Biblical principle, but God does not leave us wondering *what* to obey.

Obedience: it is the cornerstone of spirituality. It is the inner attitude of heart that listens intently, then responds wholeheartedly to the authority of God and those God sends into your life. Another definition would be: “obedience is humility under authority.” That is what Philippians 2:8b means when it says,

He humbled Himself and became obedient... (NKJV)

Obedience is the natural outgrowth of humility. Disobedience is the natural outgrowth of pride.

Obedience is that expression of humility that results from joyful compliance with the demands that accompany being under authority. It involves the heart of a slave, clothed with the love of God. We express that love to God by responding joyfully to His absolutes and seeking diligently to find and obey His

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principles in Scripture. There is, however, still a third way.

3- THE MATTER OF OBEDIENCE TO THE AUTHORITIES GOD PLACES OVER YOU.

This may be the most misunderstood and least obeyed area of obedience to God. It is not an isolated concept in Scripture. There are specific areas in the Bible where it is spelled out. For instance:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.
(Ephesians 6:1 NIV)

1) Children are to obey their parents, not because their parents are right; but because obeying your parents is right. The office they hold merits that level of respect, and by obeying them, the children are learning to obey God and other authorities. Another illustration:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men,

because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

(Ephesians 6:5-8 NIV)

2) In the realm of vocational authority, the issue is even more difficult to grasp, because now we are dealing with adults submitting to adults. We are to obey those over us just as we would obey Christ. Not to win their favor, or to gain promotions, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. And if they don't appreciate it? No matter. The reward comes from God, who will reward everyone accordingly. In fact, I Peter 2 tells us that unjust authority on the job is a blessing from God to test His children, grant them more grace, and please the heart of God. There are several reasons for that obedience. Hebrews 13:17 gives us two:

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (NIV)

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We are to obey those God places over us because:

- a) They are accountable to God for us and thus we are accountable to God through them. God is using them to watch over us and bless us even if they are not believers and don't understand who God is. By obeying them, we keep ourselves under the authority God is using to protect us and minister to us spiritually.
 - b) We are to obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden. Making their life difficult, Scripture says, will be of no benefit to us and will bring no glory to God and certainly will not turn their hearts to God because we will not be reflecting the mind of Christ.
- 3) The third category is that of general authority. General authority includes the government, the justice system, the police, the spiritual leadership, and people God places over us in specialized areas such as marriage (Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:18, I Peter 3:1); areas wherein we willingly place ourselves under another and expect God to honor that authority. Listen to Titus 3, and Romans 13:

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good,
(Titus 3:1 NIV)

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake

For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.

Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are

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due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.

(Romans 13:1-8 NKJV)

The primary emphasis here seems to be submission to the government and the agencies the government uses to enforce its authority. If you think these only apply to honest, just, and God-fearing governments, do a study of the oppressive conditions under which these passages were written and you will see how totally at odds with man's concepts these precepts are. Let's look at this passage quickly:

1- To whom is it written?

Answer: Every believer. "Let *every* soul be subject..." No exceptions here. That makes this an absolute.

2- What is the commandment?

Answer: To be in submissive obedience to all the rulers and authorities placed over you. The phrase "governing authorities or higher powers" indicates they have been designated a position of authority by God. It has nothing to do with their character, personality, or performance. It is the *position* they hold that God is honoring, not the person.

3- Why is God so insistent?

Answer: Because the powers that be are ordained of God. That mayor or governor or president or councilman who is so ungodly; the one you campaigned so against, is there by God's divine decree. It may be an act of divine discipline. It may be the sowing and reaping of man that got him or her elected. No matter. As the Psalmist said, "God sets up one and puts down another."¹ You campaign. You pray. You vote. But once that person is in office, you submit. Yes, there are exceptions, but they are so rare and so unlikely, that we ought to focus on the 99% of the time we are to obey and let God take care of the 1% we like so to talk about.

4- What does it mean when we resist?

Answer: It means we are in hand-to-hand combat with God Himself. I didn't say it, God did. "Whoever resists the authorities, resists God Himself, and they must suffer the same

¹ Psalm 75:7

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consequences.” (That’s what verse 2 says.)

5- Why do we resist authority so?

Answer: We don’t honestly believe they are there for our good. We look at the person, rather than the position, and justify our disobedience accordingly. But, according to verse 3, if we obey, God will be responsible to see that we have the favor we are supposed to have. He will be responsible for the outcome.

6- Why should we be afraid to resist authority?

Answer: Because they are ministers of God placed there for our benefit. When we resist, God frees that authority to exercise His divine anger on us. That ought to generate in us an awe of their position.

7- What about unfair taxes?

Answer: Pay them. Because they are just? No. Because they are there at the request of the authority God placed in our midst (verses 6, 7).

8- What’s the sum total of it all?

Answer: Love. Owe only one thing: the debt of love to God for what He has done. You repay that debt by honoring all those He places over you, for as you do, you are honoring Him. Because they deserve it? God forbid. No, because He deserves it.

The powers that be are ordained of God. Obedience to them is often God’s most abrasive but effective test of our character and our love for Him. If we love Him, we will obey. And that obedience may well come in the test tube of responding to a cruel, unjust, or inconsiderate boss, husband, parent, or government. According to I Peter, chapter two, we are told to:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,

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

For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. (I Peter 2:13-15 NIV)

Verse 18 moves into the arena of unjust authority.

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

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For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.

“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

(I Peter 2:18-25 NIV)

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives...”

(I Peter 3:1,2,7a NIV)

There is a principle at work here that goes far beyond the surface of what these passages are saying, though what these passages are saying is difficult enough. The principle is that of obeying unjust and undeserving authority, *as though you were obeying God*. This presents a most challenging series of choices for the mind of man. Apart from the mind of Christ, we just cannot justify this. To obey God is difficult enough, because His commandments do not line up with the world's concepts of behavior, and the very idea of submission to authority is contrary to man's natural bent. At least, however, we know that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and sovereign. Therefore, even His difficult commands can be received as right.

But the problem becomes even more complex when we are asked to obey mere men. We simply cannot justify it unless we come to see our obedience,

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- a) As obeying the office, not the person, and
- b) As an act of obedience to God.

For most of us, we handle it this way: If the authority is kind, just, considerate, and godly, we assume that God is generating His character through them, and thus, we are to obey. So long as we are appreciated, understood, and not abused, their words might have come from God, and thus we can comply, usually expecting to be noticed and rewarded accordingly.

Now graduate to “Advanced Submission: 301.” Move on to your class in “Obedience to Unjust Authority.” Now it is no longer difficult, it is impossible. A boss who is an overbearing, insensitive, inconsiderate unbeliever. How can God use him? How can God use her? How can he or she know the will of God? A husband who is cold, indifferent, unspiritual, uncooperative? How can a woman be expected to learn anything godly from him? A parent who is harsh, has favorites, is prejudiced and unloving, how can a child submit to the likes of them?

Now we are treading in sensitive territory. We may be willing to obey the absolutes of Scripture, even try to surrender to the principles of Scripture as led by God’s Spirit, even yield to the possibility that God could teach us through godly authority, but this is where the natural mind clicks off, and a message comes on the screen of your heart that says: “error code 101, does not compute.”

Peter is trying desperately to help us see that this is the essence of obedience. This is the mind of Christ brought to fruition. This is where the rubber meets the road. In fact, he goes so far, that he says, Suppose you do respond well to pleasant authority, or suppose you get punished deservedly, what kind of testimony is that? Any fool can do that. No, “If you want to really please God’s heart”, says Peter, “you have to learn to *understand* your calling.”

I have printed in bold face four phrases. They are done for emphasis. Those four statements are these:

- 1- “Every authority instituted among men.”
- 2- “It is God’s will...”
- 3- “If you suffer for doing good...”
- 4- “To this you were called...”

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I beg you to take this passage and study it for yourself. And please pay special attention to those four phrases. They constitute a foundation for obedience in the life of the Christian that will lift him or her to heights of blessings not experienced elsewhere.

“To this you were called,” says Peter. To what? You were called to suffer “for doing good.” You were called to be misunderstood and taken advantage of, then punished for it. Otherwise, you cannot demonstrate a life so different that men and women will see Christ in you.

If you are to demonstrate the mind of Christ, you must do so in the context Christ demonstrated it. “He suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin”. That can’t be said of you or of me. He was sinless, yet they hurled insults at Him, but He didn’t retaliate. They made threats on His life, then followed through with those threats, but “He entrusted Himself to Him who judges fairly”. He said, “Here, Father, this is your problem. My problem is to respond properly.”

Why would God want us to do that? It is God’s will. This is the only way, according to verse 15, you can “silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” For this reason, and what better reason could God give us, we are to submit to “every authority instituted among men.”

The whole idea is that Christians joyfully, willingly, even intentionally place themselves in conditions under which they are being asked to respond to authority that does not appear to be fair, or to people who do not seem to care. This, it seems, is the best possible way to “put to silence the foolish talk of ignorant men.” This is God’s best mirror to reflect the incredible difference between the mind of God and the heart of man. It is an honor. It is a privilege. It is God’s will. To this you were called.

Oh, so many of us wait for years, begging God to reveal His calling to us. Oh, so many of us pray for years, begging God to reveal His will to us. This is God’s will. To this we were called. God wants us to obey “every authority instituted among men” as though we were obeying Him. The marriage arena is the toughest of all to make this work. But it is also the best possible proving ground of the mind of Christ. That is why Peter said, In the same way, wives, be submissive to obey your husbands,

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even if and especially if they do not believe the word themselves. Why? “To put to silence the foolish talk of ignorant men.”² There is no answer for a life that is so submissive under attack, except the grace of God. So the more disagreeable your husband is, the more grace God gives you to obey, thus the more beautiful the message you broadcast to the world.

In the same way, husbands are to obey God and love their wives, according to verse 7 of chapter 3. “In the same way” means when they don’t deserve it. When they aren’t loveable, you love them. And the more unlovable they become, the more of a miracle you become. Thus, the more glory goes to God, and the more treasures are laid up for you in Heaven.

There are exceptions. The violation of moral and spiritual absolutes requires an appeal to authority and ultimately a choice of obeying God rather than man. But those exceptions actually occur so rarely and are claimed so regularly that we hesitate to mention them in this context. A husband forbidding his wife from going to church is not just reason to disobey. A boss asking his employee to work late when he doesn’t want to isn’t just reason to disobey. Bad language, verbal abuse, insensitivity: these things are despicable, but not necessarily reasons to disobey. God may well be saying to you, “Yes, they are wrong. Here is your chance to do the will of God. To this you were called.”

We will proceed cautiously for the next few studies to look at how God views obedience and disobedience in the life of the Christian. Our ultimate objective will be the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ is “obedient unto death.” His death was unjust. It was the most unjust act ever perpetrated, for He was the only one who ever lived who was sinless. Yet He did not come out from under God’s authority by resisting the authority God was allowing to treat Him unfairly. Had He done so, we would be lost. His acceptance of His Father’s sovereignty through unjust authority made it possible for us be born again. And our right response to authority, especially unjust authority, may well do the same for others.

You say, “It doesn’t make sense.” It isn’t supposed to. His ways are too much higher than our ways. “It isn’t natural”, you say. True. That’s proof that it comes from God. It requires something supernatural to obey. That’s when obedience begins

² II Peter 2:15

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to be a stepping stone to spiritual greatness, when only God in us can possibly enable us to obey.

Do you want to be obedient? Do you want to demonstrate your love for God by “keeping His commandments”? Then lay up the Word in your heart day and night and as you meditate on it, be certain that every time an absolute surfaces, you humbly ask God for the grace to obey. Every time a principle surfaces, take it to God and ask His Spirit to lead you. Then be willing to do whatever His Spirit tells you. But, oh, Beloved, here is the acid test. Let God (or better still ask God to) put you under authority that is unjust or unfair and give you a chance to do His will.

To this you were called. It is why you are here. And as you submit yourself to that husband or parent or boss or government that does not have your best interest at heart, you praise God that *He has your best interest at heart*, and your best interest is spiritual, not physical. And since the powers that be are ordained of God, you are there by divine destiny. Thank Him. Praise Him. Then submit. Obey with joy.

The unbelieving world will be in awe. They will ask “What are you doing?” Here is your answer, Beloved, “I am walking in His steps.”

TO WALK IN HIS STEPS

To walk in His steps, what a privilege rare
For any believer to find himself there.
Walking and living before man and God
In exactly the footsteps the Master did trod.

When He was reviled, He reviled not again
Though it was true, He committed no sin.
He simply submitted and when He was through
He turned and said, “Now, let this mind be in you.”

Suffer unjustly; though the world be appalled
Dearly Beloved, to this you’ve been called.
This is an honor; This is God’s will
And God’s grace awaits you if you’ll but be still.

And humbly, in His power, simply obey
Under authority, day after day,
Knowing the heights will follow the depths
When you, in humility, walk in His steps.

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