

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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The Sermon: LET NO MAN BREAK THE LAWS OF THE LAND

Scripture: Doctrine and Covenants 58:4, 5.

My law shall be kept on this land. ... Let no man think that he is ruler, but let God rule him that judgeth, according to the counsel of his own will; or, in other words, him that counselleth or sitteth upon the judgment seat. Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land; wherefore be subject to the powers that be, until He reigns whose right it is to reign, and subdues all enemies under his feet. Behold, the laws which ye have received from my hand are the laws of the church, and in this light, ye shall hold them forth.

Let no man break the laws of the land; for he that keepeth
the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land.

The question of the relationship between church and state, and between the Christian and the state, has always been a live one. In the earliest years of Christianity there were many men such as Paul who saw that the Roman Empire was in many ways a good and a beneficent thing. In many ways it was harsh and cruel; but it did establish law and order all over a very turbulent and lawless world; it destroyed pirates, brigands, and outlaws, punished evil doers, and gave protection to its citizens as they travelled, and did business with each other. Paul could never have carried out his missionary journeys except under the protection of the Roman Empire.

There was then, and there is now, a minority which is unwilling to yield obedience to civil law, who because they claim to live by a higher spiritual law, refuse to give obedience to the civil law. The Zealots, a political party of the Jews, would give allegiance to no law except the law of Moses, and were more or less constantly in trouble with the Roman Empire. Some Christians claimed and taught that because Christ was their King, and because he was coming soon to set up his earthly kingdom, they were not obligated to obey Rome, or to discharge civic responsibilities. This was not only anarchistic; it was unchristian, for Jesus had commanded: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's"

It is not necessarily wrong to look forward to Christ's second coming and reign. But men must dwell in the present

and meet the realities of the present, as well as look into the future. It is our duty as good followers of Jesus now to be good citizens of whatever government under which we are placed -- not denying our right to work and to vote for the alteration or improvement of that government.

Though the Christian claims Christ as King, he can claim no special exemptions or special privileges from civil law because he is a Christian. If he would share in the benefits and protections of good government he must also share in the responsibilities and burdens of good government. He cannot at the same time claim special privilege, and immunity from any responsibility or burden of obligation. Liberty under law is contingent upon accepting the restrictions of that law. If you want to build a bridge, you build it within the restrictions of the laws of physics, mathematics, and engineering, or you are not free to build a bridge. Liberty is not anarchy. Liberty is not freedom to do what you please, but freedom to do what you ought, under law. "Obedience to law is the highest liberty."

If no individual Christian has the right to claim special privilege from government because of his religion, neither has any church the right to seek special privilege or preferment for itself from the government which exists to protect and safeguard the right of all citizens to worship as they please. Government must be just, equitable, impartial, or it cannot claim the loyalty and support of those discriminated against.

Is the Christian required by the law of God to support and obey his government, no matter what that government requires of him? Paul wrote to the Romans: "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." (Rom.13: 1,2) This scripture has often been quoted by tyrants to prove that they ruled by divine right, that the king could do no wrong, that might makes right. The Interpreter's Bible says of this passage: "He (Paul) hurled his anathemas against anarchy; he did not foresee that they would be quoted in defense of tyranny."

The Roman persecution had not started yet at the time Paul wrote, but there are indications that he saw the possibility of it. Though Paul does not discuss the question of what to do about a completely ungodly, tyrannical government that infringes upon the rights of conscience, it would be hard to believe that Paul meant this saying to be taken as the charter of authority for just any sort of wicked ruler. Undoubtedly Paul knew something of the Jewish concept of government as a theocracy, with God as the ruler, exercising his power through priests, judges, and magistrates. Against that background he wrote: "The powers that be are ordained of (or instituted by) God," meaning that kings, rulers, and magistrates are accountable to, and hold their office as a stewardship under God, who is King and Ruler of the universe. They are subject to the same moral judgments as the common citizen. Their governments stand or fall according to that judgment.

The state and its officers exist primarily for the protection and welfare of the individual, not the individual for the state. As long as the state fulfills this function in righteousness and equity, it will stand. When it fails, the judgments of God will sooner or later fall upon it. Yet although the state exists for the individual, not the individual for the state, no individual can place his personal preference above the common good. The individual is pre-eminent, but not supreme.

Is civil disobedience ever justifiable? Yes -- if the government no longer

protects the rights and freedoms of the citizens who created it, it is the right of the citizens to alter or abolish it. If this statement is not true, then the framers of our Declaration of Independence, and the men who resisted Hitler's occupation forces in World War II were violators of the laws of God -- and this we are not prepared to admit. Men always have a right to resist laws which invade the right of conscience, the freedom of worship, of speech, or of religion -- peacefully if they may, forcibly if they must. Resistance is sometimes not only a right, but a duty.

The instruction read in our scripture lesson was given to a church founded under the protection of a democracy. "Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land." As long as the majority of men in a democracy keep the laws of God, the laws of the state will be the laws of God, and the will of God will be the will of the state. If the time ever comes that the laws of the state violate the laws of God, it will be either because the majority of American citizens have chosen evil, or because they have slept on their rights, relaxed their vigilance, and allowed ungodly men to take control of government. In either case they deserve what they get, and the oppression which follows is a just judgment.

We look forward to the day when Christ shall be our only ruler, when he comes to reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Until that day we recognize the right of civil government to rule, and the citizen's duty to obey civil laws, so long as the government and its constitutional and statutory law protect men's freedoms, and do not infringe on the realm of conscience in which men are amenable only to God.

It is our religious duty to be good citizens -- to help bear the responsibilities of government as well as to share in its benefits -- to be peaceful, law-abiding citizens, dealing with our fellow-citizens in justice, equity, and Christian charity. As long as we discharge our responsibilities of citizenship and keep the laws of God there will be no excuse for violating the laws of the land, for "he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land."