



OUR DUTY TO THE STATE

Reading: 1 Peter 2

Note: The State is the country in which we live, with its rulers or government, and its laws. Today true disciples of Christ live in many countries which have different laws, some of them opposed to God's ways. This lesson considers the Christian's duty to the State, and particularly whether Christians should take part in politics or fight for their country. Lessons 9 and 13 will help with parts of this lesson.

God's people in Old Testament times

About 3,500 years ago, just after they had left Egypt, God gathered together the people of Israel at Mount Sinai to make a covenant (or agreement) with them. He was to be their God and they were to be His nation. The Law that God gave them contained rules for worship and for daily living. There was no conflict (disagreement) between their laws and their beliefs since God had provided both.

Later, God chose kings to reign over the people of Israel for Him. This was God's kingdom on earth, and the king's army was God's army. The king was there to do what God commanded. But the people of Israel ignored God's law and followed the wicked ways of other nations and so God brought His kingdom on earth to an end. First the nation of Assyria came against the northern kingdom of Israel and took the people captive and then scattered them, then the Babylonians took captive the southern kingdom of Judah. So God's people were then living in countries where false gods were worshipped and where some of the laws were opposed to God's ways.

The behaviour of God-fearing Jews in these difficult circumstances shows us how we should live in countries with laws and practices that conflict with God's ways.

Should they obey God or the foreign ruler?

Daniel and his friends were some of those taken captive to Babylon by king Nebuchadnezzar when the southern kingdom of Judah was coming to an end. Sometimes they had to choose between obeying God's laws or those of the Babylonians. The following examples are useful:

REFERENCE	THE PROBLEM	WHAT DANIEL AND/OR HIS FRIENDS DID	WHAT HAPPENED IN THE END
Daniel 1:8-16	Daniel and his friends were given meat that had probably been sacrificed to idols. They did not want to eat it, but knew that this would not please the king.	They did not eat the meat and asked for vegetables instead.	God looked after them and they looked healthier than the others.
Daniel 3	Nebuchadnezzar commanded the people to fall down and worship a golden statue he had set up.	Daniel's three friends refused to worship anything other than God.	They were thrown into a fiery furnace, but God delivered them and they were unharmed.
Daniel 6	Daniel's enemies wanted to kill Daniel, so they persuaded the new king, Darius, to only allow prayers to himself.	Daniel continued to pray to God with his windows wide open.	He was thrown into a den of lions, but God's angel protected him.

These examples teach us:

- to put God first in our lives
- that God alone is to be worshipped
- to keep to our principles and always try to do what God wants
- to trust God.





Daniel and his friends were among the best of the king's servants and became important government officials. They were not trouble makers, looking for the opportunity to break the king's laws. It was only when the law of the land conflicted (did not agree) with God's law that they refused to obey the king.

This is an important principle for all who follow the Lord Jesus. They must keep the laws of the State that agree with the laws of God (as many do). Daniel's enemies could find nothing wrong with his behaviour (Daniel 6:4,5). This should also be true of us.

Christians must obey the laws of the State (their country), unless these laws disagree with the laws of God.

God's people today

God counts all true believers as His people and today they consist of Jewish and Gentile believers. Just as Israel in Old Testament times were God's special people and were called "a holy nation", so baptized believers are now described in the same way. This can be seen by comparing the Old and New Testament passages below. Even though disciples of Christ live in many different countries, the Bible describes them as a special nation, God's people.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL (‘NATURAL ISRAEL’)	GOD'S PEOPLE TODAY (‘SPIRITUAL ISRAEL’)
<p>Exodus 19:5,6 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation ...</p>	<p>1 Peter 2:9,10 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.</p>

Believers today who are now part of God's holy nation are also part of God's future kingdom and are waiting for their King to return to Jerusalem. So while they wait they must do nothing which will damage their relationship with God: God must be first in all that they do. Then at his coming Christ Jesus will call them together to serve and work with him.

The Christian's attitude towards the authorities of his country

Jesus lived in Israel at a time when the nation was under Roman rule, and by their law he suffered and died. But Jesus was never a political trouble-maker, even though many of the Jews hoped he would free them from the Romans. When Jesus was asked whether the Jews should pay taxes to the Romans, whom they hated, he laid down important principles using a coin with the image of the Roman Emperor, Caesar:

"Render (give) to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

This means that we should pay our taxes as the law requires (which Paul makes equally clear in Romans 13:7). It also shows that we should respect and obey our rulers as well as God.

Not only did Jesus accept Roman rule but he also did not try to replace the Jewish religious leaders, who were misusing their position in the temple and leading the people astray. The religious leaders tried to stop Jesus teaching and healing, but even when he was obviously annoying them and his life was in danger, Jesus carried on with his work of salvation. He knew that this was God's work, and was most important.

This faithful example of Jesus was followed by the apostles. They too were honest, law-abiding people who did not become involved in the politics of the country in which they lived. They did not try to change the world through politics. When conflict occasionally came, from the Jewish or Roman authorities, they put God first and obeyed His laws. So





when the apostles were told to stop preaching the good news of salvation, they replied, *“We must obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29). See also Acts 4:17-20.

Paul tells us that we should be obedient to our rulers because all authorities are put in place by God (although most do not realise it). Note that Paul wrote these words to believers who lived in a harsh society, where many were slaves and treated unjustly:

*“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists **what God has appointed**, and those who resist will incur judgement”* (Romans 13:1,2).

So if we disobey the laws of our country, we are really disobeying God. In 1 Timothy 2:1,2 Paul encouraged believers to pray for those in authority in their country:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way”.

The laws of a country often ensure that it is a safe place in which to live. There is usually no conflict between a Christian's duties to the State and to God, and so when he obeys the State, he is also obeying God. For example, murder is wrong in both the laws of the State and God's laws. However, the State sometimes expects its citizens to do things which conflict with Bible teaching, such as going to war. Disciples of Christ must then decide whether to obey God or the State. We have the apostle Peter's example to follow: *“We must obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29).

There are some occupations and interests that disciples should avoid. These include making destructive weapons or explosives, and work which may require the use of force (e.g. armed forces or police). Also, believers should avoid taking an oath of allegiance. This is because the Lord Jesus is the leader of all true believers and our allegiance (loyalty) should only be to him. People who realise that their occupation is not suitable for a Christian should pray for help and guidance. God is able to help.

The Christian and politics

Although God is working out His purpose on this earth (Daniel 4:32), it is not clear how He will do this, nor which people and nations He will use.

Since Christians do not know which political party God wants in control of their country, they leave elections in God's hands and do not vote. They will not become involved in politics as this could involve them in making decisions against God's will. It is therefore wrong to be involved in human government, in either local or national politics, because God's people belong to His order of things and already have a King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Since true Christians have chosen to follow Christ, how can they vote for a political party that is not dedicated to serving Christ? Believers should not become involved in politics to make the world a better place because human leaders are unable to do this. Believers know that the Lord Jesus will do this when he returns. So the true Christian will stay outside politics, either actively or as a voter, using his time to tell others about God's coming kingdom.

The need to keep separate from politics and from unsuitable occupations is nothing to do with the politics and practices of any particular State. The same principles apply to God's servants everywhere. They must now live under *“the law of Christ”* (1 Corinthians 9:21) and separate themselves from human government and politics:

“Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you” (2 Corinthians 6:17)

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ...” (Romans 12:2).





The Christian and war

In Old Testament times God expected the people of Israel to destroy their enemies living in the land of Canaan so they would not be tempted to follow their evil ways (Exodus 23:31-33). God had instructed them to fight, so it was their duty to obey.

But Jesus, who lived when God's kingdom no longer existed on earth, said,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43,44).

The New Testament contains other similar messages:

"Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also ... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them If possible ... live peaceably with all ... Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God ... If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head" (Matthew 5:39, Romans 12:14,18-20).

When Jesus was being arrested he told Peter to put his sword away and added, *"all who take the sword will perish by the sword"* (Matthew 26:52). Jesus explained to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, that although he was a king, his kingdom had not yet come:

"My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36).

Jesus said that because his kingdom did not exist on the earth at that time, his servants did not fight. His kingdom still has not come, so true believers cannot be involved in fighting for their country. If they did, Christians from one country might find themselves fighting against and even killing their brothers in Christ from another country. By refusing to fight Jesus was not being a pacifist or a coward – he showed enormous courage in facing death on the cross to make it possible for our sins to be forgiven. Whilst God's people in Old Testament times clearly knew which battles God wanted them to fight, Christians today do not know how God is working out His purpose with the nations of the world. If they fight for their country they may be fighting against God's purpose. True believers therefore ask to be excused from military service as it is against their conscience.

Summary

Believers should:

- obey the laws of the country except when they conflict with God's laws
- avoid any job, activity or involvement that might lead them into conflict between God's laws and man's laws.

Verses to learn: 1 Peter 2:9-11

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Passages to read: Daniel chapters 3 & 6; Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13; 1 Peter 2:13-17

