



## **The New Life in Christ**

### **Lesson 12**

### **The Disciple and the State**

**I**n these lessons so far we have considered many aspects of discipleship, particularly those which affect our relationships with other people. In this lesson we shall consider how our discipleship should affect our relationship with the country in which we live and the government of that country.

#### **The Prayer of Jesus for his Disciples**

Just before he died, Jesus knew that the time was coming when he would have to leave his disciples and he was concerned for them. He knew that they would face many problems without his presence there to guide them and he told them that he would not leave them without any help as orphans (John 14:18). Later he offered a wonderful prayer asking God to look after them.

“And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

John 17:11-18

We can summarise the main points of these verses like this.

1. Jesus is about to leave the world and ascend to heaven after his resurrection. He asks his Father to keep (to guard, look after) the disciples in his absence.
2. He has given them the Word of God and, because they have chosen to follow him, the world has hated them; they have nothing in common with the world in which they live.
3. Yet Jesus does not ask God to rescue them from the world but that God would keep them out of evil or trouble.
4. They are to be separate from the world (2Corinthians 6:17), sanctified or made holy by the Word of God given to them.
5. Not only are they not to be rescued from the world, Jesus has sent them out into the world to preach the Gospel message (Matthew 10:7).

This sets the pattern for disciples of all generations since the time of Jesus Christ. After baptism they continue to live in a world with which spiritually they have nothing in common. They should preach the Gospel and witness to it by their personal lives, even though men and women will not accept it and may hate them for it. They are not to be drawn back into the world but to be separate from it and it is the Word of God in their lives which will help them with this.

#### **Law Abiding Citizens**

The Bible is very clear about the way in which true disciples should behave in this world. They should be the most law abiding citizens of the country in which they live. When the Apostle Paul wrote the

Letter to the Romans, he wrote to disciples who lived in a harsh society. Many of them were slaves and many were treated unjustly. Yet he wrote these words to them:

“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 judgment.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”  
Romans 13:1-5

It is important to note that *all* authorities are appointed by God - “there is no authority, except from God.” Those in authority are placed there by God, although usually they are not aware of this fact. This means that when a disciple disobeys the rulers of his country, he is really disobeying God. Notice that Paul says that we do this “for the sake of conscience.” We should obey the laws of our country because God commands us to, not because we are afraid of punishment if we are caught disobeying them. The following scriptures develop this thought:

“For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”  
Romans 13:6-8

“Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,

to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.”  
Titus 3:1-2

“Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme,

or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.”

1 Peter 2:13-17

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.”  
Matthew 22:21

## **Conscientious Objection**

However, there may be certain situations in which a disciple of Jesus has to make difficult decisions. Sometimes we have to choose between obeying God or obeying man. Such a decision had to be made by Peter and John soon after Jesus had ascended into heaven. They offended the Jewish rulers when they accused them of murdering the Lord Jesus and they were told by them not to preach again. They responded:

“We must obey God rather than men.”

Acts 5:29

This same principle applies to us today. We must obey the laws of our country, but if we are asked by the state to do something which is contrary to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ then we must refuse to do it, even if there are severe penalties for this disobedience. The most common example of

this is when disciples are asked to fight for their country. Perhaps it is a time of war and the country is in danger from its enemies, the government may demand that its citizens take up arms and fight. God's servants will refuse to do this, their Master told them to love their enemies, and this they must do. They must not fight. This becomes a matter of *objecting for conscience sake*.

In some countries the penalties for refusing to fight are severe. Some disciples have suffered imprisonment and some death because they have steadfastly refused to go to war.

We can summarise how we should respond to any call to military service as follows:

1. No baptized follower of Jesus should seek to be in an occupation which could force him to be involved in violence toward another person. This would bring his allegiance to Jesus into doubt. When Jesus faced death and was being questioned by Pilate he said that his servants would not fight (John 18:36).
2. If an unbaptized person is in military service and, having developed an understanding of the Gospel, wishes to be baptized, he should speak to his commanding officer, explaining the situation. He must find a way to leave military service before he can be baptized.
3. He must make it absolutely clear that, as a follower of Christ, he will not fight whatever the consequences.
4. If we are called up to military service in a time of crisis for our country, we must refuse to do this.
5. The same principles apply in any occupation where the person may be called upon to show aggression toward another human being or carry offensive weapons. Prison warders, armed security guards and policemen are the most obvious examples.

These are not easy decisions, especially when they may involve hardship or persecution both for the individual and his family. We shall have to decide what is really important to us – the affairs of this life or the Kingdom of God to come. As ever, it is the Word of God which will comfort and strengthen us.

“God ... will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.” 1Corinthians 10:13

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Luke 12:34

These are very serious matters. They are decisions we need to think through before we are baptized, especially if we are already in one of the occupations mentioned above. It is not a matter of being a pacifist out of cowardice. Jesus would not fight yet he showed the greatest strength of character and was prepared to face death on the cross in order to save his people from their sins. The disciple's role in life is to show perfect restraint in the face of provocation; to love and pray for those who persecute him/her, because in so doing we reflect the love of God which we see perfectly demonstrated in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” Matthew 5:44-45

## **The Disciple and Politics**

When the Apostle Paul visited Philippi, he was badly beaten and thrown into prison because he preached the Gospel. God rescued him miraculously but he demanded to see the magistrates; he reminded them that he was a Roman citizen and that they had behaved illegally in treating him as they did. Today we would say that he ‘stood up for his rights’. Roman citizenship was a very special thing and those who possessed it had to be treated in a careful and privileged way. We do not really know why Paul acted like this, but we know that when he wrote to the ecclesia at Philippi some years later he said:

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”  
Philippians 3:20-21 (NIV)

Whatever country we live in, if we are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ then we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. We have one king who will rule over us, Jesus Christ, and we are responsible to him. We know what his 'political manifesto' is and what he will do on earth when he returns (read for example Psalm 72). In a sense, if we are baptized, these are the things for which we cast our vote because we are baptized into the 'things concerning the Kingdom of God'.

We have seen that we should be law abiding citizens of the country in which we live, but that we must obey God rather than men if there is a conflict between the laws of our country and the law of God. But what should we do if we think the politics of our government are unjust and unfair? What if there is corruption or favouritism? What should we do if the poor get poorer and the rich get richer? Does the Bible teach that we can get involved in politics to try and get a better government?

Are any of the following acceptable to God in the lives of the disciples of Jesus?

- Voting in political elections
- Joining a political party
- Taking part in political protests
- Becoming a magistrate or other involvement in the community

When we read the Bible carefully we shall see that none of these things are acceptable to God. He alone puts the rulers of the nations in their positions as Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon many years ago.

“...that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men.”  
Daniel 4:17

If we *really* believe these words then we will not get involved in politics in any way. We will understand that God has chosen our rulers, even though we may not be able to understand His reasons for doing so. If we vote at an election, how do we know which political party or ruler God has chosen? If we vote against the elected candidate, then we shall be voting against the one God has chosen! We do not know which policies God is introducing into a country and why He is doing so! What we do know is that eventually Jesus Christ will establish God's Kingdom on earth. It is for that time that we hope and pray.

The Apostle Peter saw a world-wide challenge for disciples to develop Christ-like attitudes and patterns of behaviour. He wrote of them as an international family of God:

“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.  
Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evil doers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”  
1Peter 2:9-12

Why did Peter describe disciples as sojourners and exiles? Think of it this way. When we visit other countries we do not expect to vote in their elections. At the same time, whatever government is in power in *that* country we are expected to keep their laws, pay all our debts and keep out of trouble. The members of Christ's family must act like this wherever they are - at home or abroad - because they do not really belong to *any* country, they belong to the Kingdom of God.

## When God's Kingdom Comes

What will happen to the faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ when he returns to reign over the world?

The Bible teaches us that they will be given great responsibility in the coming kingdom; they will reign as kings over the earth with Christ. First however, those believers who have died will be raised

from the dead. Together with those who are alive at the coming of Christ they will be judged and those found worthy will be made immortal. This teaching regarding the resurrection is found in many places in the Bible, but the great chapter on this theme is 1Corinthians 15.

The following scriptures give us a picture of what will happen to the immortal believers, both Jews and Gentiles:

"Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also reign with him:"

2Timothy 2:10-12

"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,

and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Revelation 5:9-10

"And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them."

Daniel 7:27

These words express the things that are really important for true disciples. This is what they wait and hope for, to share immortality with the Lord Jesus Christ and to help him in the work of ruling over the mortal population in the millennial age. Like the faithful men and women described in Hebrews 11, they are fully persuaded of these things and are willing to be strangers and pilgrims in this life as they await the coming of their king.

#### Questions

1. Why are disciples separate from the world in which they live?
2. Who chooses who will rule over the countries of the world?
3. What is Conscientious Objection?
4. Why do disciples not vote in political elections?
5. What role will Jesus give his disciples when he returns to this earth?
6. What does Romans 12:18-21 teach us?