



Lesson 34

OUR DUTY TO THE STATE

Reading 1 Peter 2

Note: *The State is the country we live in, its rulers or government and its laws and regulations*

Throughout history God has been preparing for Himself a people who understand His purpose and who will share together the blessings of the Kingdom, and the joys of everlasting life. In Bible times those people lived as a nation - the nation of Israel - which had God as its King. There was then no conflict between the State and the believer. Now things have changed, and we need to consider the Christian's duty to the State, especially with regard to such matters as politics and war.

God's people

God is still preparing a people, now from all nations, who will be the centre of His purpose in the Kingdom. The apostle John saw a vision of that community, and he described it as follows:

"A great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindred, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9,10).

Those people will be gathered together, at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth, to form a new nation - God's own nation - and they will reign with King Jesus for the 1000 years of the Kingdom on earth (see Revelation 5:9,10; 20:4)

God's Kingdom existed once, long ago, when kings sat on God's throne in Jerusalem and ruled over Israel. It will exist again when King Jesus returns (see Acts 1:6; Luke 1:32, 33).

God's kingdom: in the past

3,500 years ago, at Mount Sinai, God assembled the people of Israel, who were newly escaped from Egypt, and made a covenant (or agreement) with them. They were to be His nation, and He was to be their God. They were to keep the law He gave them through Moses, then they would inherit the land of Canaan - which we now know as Israel. (Read Exodus 19:1-8.) The laws of God were the laws of the State. Later, God chose kings for His people. The king's army was God's army, and his wars were God's wars. The king was there to do as God commanded him.

Then all that changed. The kings forgot God's law, they followed the bad example of nations around and, at last, God decided to end His Kingdom on earth. First the nation of Assyria took captive the northern tribes of Israel, then Babylon took captive the southern tribe of Judah. The divided people became exiles without a homeland, and found themselves living in states which worshipped other gods, whose laws were often against those of the One True God.

How they behaved in those circumstances is of great importance to us; for those who now become God's people can also live in states with difficult laws and practices.

To obey God or man?

The experiences of Daniel and his friends give us a clear example of how to behave in the nations where we now live. They were taken Captive by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon when he attacked and conquered Jerusalem (about 600 BC), and from the beginning of their exile they showed they were going to put God first in their lives. Look at these examples:

The problem	What Daniel and/or his friends did	What happened in the end
Daniel and his friends were given meat that had probably been sacrificed to idols. They did not want to eat it, but knew this would upset the King and his officials.	They did not eat the meat and ask for vegetables to be given them instead.	God looked after them and they looked healthier than the others. (See Daniel 1:15-17.)
Nebuchadnezzar told all the people to fall down and worship an image 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's enemies wanted to get rid of Daniel so they persuaded the new king Darius to ban all prayers unless they were made to him.	Daniel carried on as he had always done and prayed to God with his windows wide open.	He was thrown into the den of lions, but God saved him and he was unharmed.

These examples teach us –

- to put God first in our lives;
- to stick to our principles and never compromise;
- that God alone is to be worshipped.

But Daniel and his friends were not trouble makers, looking for the opportunity to break the King's laws and receive fame and glory. When those laws agreed with the law of God, they were very law-abiding men. Indeed they were among the best of the King's servants and became important government officials, supervising the King's business.

This, too, is an important example for all who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. When the law of the State agrees with the law of God (and many human laws are based in one way or another upon the law of God), then we must be law-abiding people too. Like Daniel, it must be true of us that there is nothing wrong with our behaviour (see Daniel 6:4,5).

Christians must obey the laws of the State (their country),
unless these laws are against the laws of God

God's Kingdom: In the days of Jesus

For nearly 2000 years, God's people have lived among nations which have laws and ideas of their own. It was the same for the Lord Jesus himself: he lived in Israel at a time when the nation was subject to Roman rule, and by that law he suffered and died. But he was never a political trouble-maker, even though many of his fellow-Jews hoped he might be. Nor did he

try to replace the Jewish authorities, who were misusing their position in the temple and in other ways.

Asked once about his attitude to the Roman power, Jesus showed how a Roman coin had the image of Caesar (the Roman Emperor). He then laid down a very important principle:

"Render (that is, give) therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

That means that we should pay our taxes, as the law requires (something that the apostle Paul makes equally clear in Romans 13:7), and do everything else the State requires of us **as long as that does not conflict with the requirements of God's law**. This is a very important distinction, and it is one which was first practised by the Lord Jesus himself. He always rendered to God the things that belonged to God, and so should we.

The Jewish authorities tried to stop Jesus teaching and healing. But Jesus would not stop. Even when he was obviously annoying them and his life was in danger, he carried on with his work of salvation. For Jesus knew that his work was God's work, and that came first. When, at last, he stood before Pontius Pilate and was in a position in which he might have tried to do a deal with the Roman authorities to save his life, Jesus took the opportunity to make several things clear. First, he explained to the Roman Governor that although he, Jesus, was a King, his Kingdom had not yet come:

"My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).

Quite clearly, Jesus was teaching that there will come a time when his Kingdom will be established on earth (when he rules in power from Jerusalem), but that time was not then come, nor has it yet. But, Jesus' second point to Pilate was that God was still in control; behind the scenes He was directing affairs, causing His will to be done. For, as Jesus said to the Governor:

"Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above" (John 19:11).

That faithful example of the Lord Jesus was followed by the apostles. They too were honest, law-abiding citizens; they never became involved in political affairs; they kept themselves separate from national institutions - like the Roman army, or the administration of justice - and they were dedicated to the Lord's service. But when conflict came, either with the Jewish or Roman authorities, they put God first and obeyed His laws. Thus, when the apostles were told to stop preaching the good news of salvation, their response was:

"We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

God's Kingdom: In the present day

These teachings and examples are of great help to us in deciding how to behave as citizens of states which ask difficult things of us. As followers of the Lord Jesus, there are some things we should keep well clear of, and some occupations we should avoid, to limit the conflicts we might otherwise have between God's laws and those devised by men.

God counts true believers as part of His people. When you read 1 Peter chapter 2, you will notice that the language first used by God to Israel (in Exodus 19) has become the language by which He now addresses Christian believers. They are "*a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation*" (2:9), and it is their mission to live in a way that praises God. Notice that they are a nation in their own right, though of course they are scattered among the different nations among which they live.

Being separate from the world

Believers who now form part of God's nation, or Kingdom, are waiting for their King to come to Jerusalem. At his coming he will call them together to serve, and work with him. It follows

that they must do nothing until his coming which will damage their relationship with God: God must be first in all that they do. Yet, although God is at work behind the scenes to bring His purpose to its completion, it is not always clear how that will be done, nor which people and nations God will use.

It follows that it is wrong to be involved in human government, in either local or national politics, for God's people belong to His order of things and already have a King, the Lord Jesus Christ. And it would be equally wrong to try to use the political systems of men to try to bring about a better world - God will do that when Jesus comes. So the true Christian will stay outside politics, either actively or as a voter.

In the same way, it is necessary to keep out of situations which are unsuitable for the follower of Christ, like the making of destructive weapons or explosives. Taking an oath of allegiance to the State or to an earthly ruler should also be avoided. As explained earlier, the Christian will be obedient to the laws of the State (see, for example, 1 Peter 2:17) but if there has to be a choice, his or her final loyalty must be to Christ. Joining the police force or army would be inadvisable for this reason, and those who are already members before they come to this understanding will need to pray about the matter and ask for guidance from their Course Tutors. God is able to find a way out of all our difficulties.

It should be clearly understood that the need to keep separate from politics and from difficult occupations in no way reflects badly upon the politics and practices of the state in question. These principles apply in just the same way to believers everywhere. They are now under "the law of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21) and must live accordingly. As the apostle Paul said, about all worldly institutions and problems:

"Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (2 Corinthians 6:17).

Our separation from the ways and practices of human government is part of our calling out of the world, that we might truly belong to God.

Summary

1. We must obey God's laws.
2. We must obey the laws of our country except when these are in conflict with the laws of God.
3. We must avoid any job, activity or involvement that might lead us into conflict between God's laws and man's laws.

Verses to read:

Daniel chapters 3 & 6; Romans 13; Matthew 22:15-22

Learn by heart

1Peter 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 marvelous 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. "