

The Wise Men: Dilemma of Obedience

Hamlet asked, "To be or not to be, that is the question." If we simply added the letters "O" and "Y" around the "be," one of the great dilemmas for the wise men from the Christmas story would be posed. "To obey or not to obey," that was their question. Obedience was a dilemma they found themselves facing.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Should these wise men do what King Herod told them to do or should they do what they were warned about in their dream by God? To obey Herod or not to obey Herod...to obey God or not to obey God through the warning in their dream, that was the dilemma the wise men were faced within our story.

Before they met Jesus in Bethlehem, they crossed paths with the powerful and maniacal King Herod. Herod was a conniving, power-hungry and manipulative ruler.

Once the wise men came to Jerusalem, Herod called them into his presence. Once he got the information he needed from the wise men, he sent them on to find Jesus so they could report his location back to Herod.

They had their marching orders from Herod himself. Once they found Jesus, they fell down at His feet overwhelmed with great joy that led to them giving both honor and gifts to the true newborn King.

Verse 12 is where their dilemma comes to fruition. They had found Jesus and knew where He now was located. The next thing to do was to return this information to Herod; but should they? To obey or not to obey; that was the question.

Although there is no indication that the wise men were followers of the God of the Bible, the dilemma remained, nonetheless: should they obey man or obey God? This dilemma remains today and confronts people of faith on a daily basis in different avenues of life. What should a person do when he or she is faced with the dilemma to obey either God or a human being when the dilemma before them contradicts one another?

Go with the highest authority even if it means civil disobedience.

Dr. Jim Denison outlined a brilliant and clear perspective with support from the pages of the Bible as well as historical examples regarding this dilemma of obedience that has become known as civil disobedience in some instances.

"When should Christians obey or disobey the government? God's word consistently calls us to obey and support our governing authorities. Paul urged in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions."

His instruction to Christians living in Rome was clear. He wrote in Romans 13:1-2: "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."

The apostle then stated in v. 6 that "the authorities are ministers of God" and urged his readers in v. 7: "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, honor to whom honor is owed".

Peter added 1 Peter 2:13-14: “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.”

It would seem clear, then, that Christians are to submit to the authority of the government, seeing its exercise of power as God’s will for us. However, there’s more to the story. In Acts 4, the Sanhedrin, the highest authority in Judaism, ordered Peter and John to stop preaching the gospel. Their response: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (vv. 19-20).

After Peter was arrested again for preaching the gospel, he was again bold in his civil disobedience: “We must obey God rather than men.” Acts 5:29” His faithfulness to God led to his martyrdom by Rome. Paul suffered a similar fate: in 2 Timothy 4:6, he is imprisoned and executed. And so, two apostles who counseled Christians to obey the state were executed because they would not obey the state.

In Daniel 3, the Babylonian king erected a golden image and required all people to worship it. The Jewish exiles Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, testified before the idolatrous king: “We will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (v. 18). You know what happened to them. Three chapters later, Daniel refused to pray to the Persian king and was thrown into the lions’ den as a result.

In *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted: “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” He agreed with St. Augustine, who claimed that “an unjust law is no law at all.”

John R. W. Stott, in his commentary on Romans 13, asks: “Granted that the authority of the rulers is derived from God, what happens if they abuse it, if they reverse their God-given duty, commending those who do evil and punishing those who do good? Does the requirement to submit still stand in such a morally perverse situation? No. The principle is clear. We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God.”

You and I are citizens of two countries. We live in a secular nation with secular leaders we are to support and obey. But we also live in a spiritual society with an omnipotent King whose authority is supreme (Psalm 2:10-11).

Jesus taught us to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

But when we are forced to choose, we must obey our highest authority. Peter encouraged us to “show proper respect to everyone.” What does this entail? “Love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17). We are to love each other, and we are to honor our secular leaders. But we are to fear only God.”

The wise men answered their dilemma with their actions: they obeyed God and returned home by another way. They disobeyed Herod. When we are faced with the dilemma of obeying God or obeying man, may we do likewise. If we do, we too, will be known as wise men and women in the eyes of God.