

When God's Law & Man's Law Conflict

(First Tuesday Class — March 2004)

Introduction:

God has always condemned efforts to add to or subtract from His will (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6; Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Jn. 9-10; Rev. 22:18-19). Sometimes the efforts to change God's law have come from individuals and at other times they have been aided by governmental power. Sometimes the efforts have sought to counteract what God has commanded and at other times they have sought to bind new law in realms that usurp the authority of God.

When God came to this world in the flesh, some of His sharpest words of condemnation were aimed at those who changed God's law by supplanting it with human tradition. Jesus' scathing rebuke of the Pharisees was due in large part to their efforts at rewriting His law (see Matt. 23). In Matthew 15:1-20 and Mark 7:1-23, Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their additions and subtractions from God's law. The Pharisees sought to bind the human tradition of hand washing upon Jesus' disciples (Mk. 7:1-8). This was an addition to God's law. However, Jesus noted the twin problem of subtracting from God's law by the same people. While Moses' law had commanded the honor of parents, the traditions of the Pharisees sought to nullify that law (Mk. 7:9-13). The Pharisees' tradition provided for an escape from the monetary aid to parents required by Mosaic law if the children would give to a cause labeled "Corban" by their rulers.

Most would readily admit the evil inherent in the Pharisees nullifying God's command for children to honor their parents. However, the Pharisees' addition mandating the washing of hands was condemned with the same fervor. Why? Was it inherently sinful to wash one's hands? No, but it was sinful for man to **bind** a provision on others as law which God left as a matter of judgment. God has never tolerated nor sanctioned efforts by men to *add* to or *subtract* from His will.

The Bible tells us how these Pharisees sought to enforce their will. We are told that they were those who "sit on Moses' seat," referring to their illegitimate attempt to bind law (Matt. 23:2). They sought to enforce their changes to divine law because they had a place of rule or governmental power at that time (Lk. 14:1; Acts 5:34; Jn. 11:47, 57; 12:42; 18:3; et. al.). John said that Nicodemus was a "Pharisee" and then adds that he was "a ruler of the Jews" (Jn. 3:1). Later in the book, Nicodemus joined with other Pharisees in a council with authority to send out officers in a demonstration of their governmental power (Jn. 7:32, 45-53).

As the gospel spread, the New Testament records numerous cases of man's law conflicting with God's law. Acts 4 and 5 record the council's demand that Peter and John not preach in the name of Christ and the persecution that resulted when they preached the gospel in violation of that mandate. By inspiration, they stated the fundamental truth that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The remainder of the book of Acts notes similar conflicts with governmental powers bent on stopping the spread of the gospel message. With every edict issued in hostility to God's way, Christians maintained the necessity of obeying God rather than man. By the time of the book of Revelation, the conflict between governmental power and divine will had reached its zenith as Christians were dying in submission to God's law rather than yielding allegiance to illegitimate human law. A closer look at the laws and ethics accepted by the governments in New Testament times should cause alarm to Christians today as we recognize how quickly our society's laws and ethics are paralleling those of the first century Roman empire. Let us look to the pattern of God's word to tell us how we must react under similar circumstances.

I. Realm of Legitimate Governmental Authority

A. God has granted civil government the authority to regulate man, but that authority is not absolute.

1. The principle that "we must obey God rather than men" is a truth to which all must submit, whether individually, collectively or governmentally (Acts 5:29).
2. Government has authority to command obedience of its subjects only in the areas wherein God authorized it to do so.

B. Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 establish the place God gave to authorized government.

1. God has ordained government "for vengeance on evil-doers and for praise to them that do well" (1 Pet. 2:14 cf. Rom. 13:3-4).
2. God has authorized government to collect and citizens to pay taxes to sustain government (Rom. 13:6-7).
3. Government is authorized to be "an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil" and "not a

terror to good work” (Rom. 13:3-4).

- C. When a government steps out of its place to oppose action defined by God as “good work” and seeks to benefit evil, Christians are not granted the right to overthrow that government (Rom. 13:1-2), but neither are they required to submit to human law which conflicts with God’s law.

II. First Century Governmental Efforts to Change Divine Law

- A. During the first century, there was governmental acceptance of homosexuality contrary to God’s law.
 - 1. There is no doubt that homosexuality was widely accepted in first-century Roman society and that the highest officials both engaged in and protected the practice by law (see *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* by Craig A. Williams).
 - 2. Despite governmental efforts to protect and justify homosexuality, the New Testament clearly condemns it.
 - a. *For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due* (Rom. 1:26-27).
 - b. *Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God* (1 Cor. 6:9-10).
- B. During the first century, there were laws making marriage unlawful for those who obeyed God’s law regarding marriage.
 - 1. God has said, “But, because of fornications, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). Clearly, marriage is a God-given right or “gift” intended as the relationship wherein sexual desires can be rightly satisfied (1 Cor. 7:6-7).
 - 2. In the second century A.D., Tertullian made the following comment on an ungodly Roman law: "Has not Severus, that most resolute of rulers, but yesterday repealed the ridiculous Papian laws which compelled people to have children before the Julian laws allow matrimony to be contracted, and that though they have the authority of age upon their side" (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, iii, 21 - Apology, iv).
 - 3. Would such a law make the marriage of Christians impossible? No, for God still gave that right and man's law could not preclude it. That “authority of age” is the divine authority of God expressed from the eternal realm which is not nullified by human edict.
 - 4. Remember, the “Papian laws” to which Tertullian referred were passed in the time of Augustus (31 B.C. - A.D. 14) and remained in effect until late in the second century. It was to a people under such laws that Paul wrote the instruction, “But, because of fornications, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). Governmental law did not alter the exercise of rights granted to all in divine law.
- C. The evil edicts of governmental authority exercised by the Pharisees and other rulers in that time were used in an effort to capture Jesus. John recorded their efforts to put a legal veneer on their conspiracy: “Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given commandment, that, if any man knew where he was, he should show it, that they might take him” (John 11:57).
 - 1. Were the disciples of Jesus required to hand Him over to the governmental powers? Was Judas innocent of betrayal and worthy of commendation as the most noble disciple in that he submitted to the command of government?
 - 2. Obviously not! It was an unlawful use of governmental power and one could rightly disobey that illegitimate command.
- D. The Bible also records the commands of Pharaoh and Herod to kill the male children or

deliver them up to the authorities (Ex. 1:15-16, 22; Matt. 2:7-8, 16). Yet, the Bible shows God's approval for those who disobeyed the ungodly demands made (Ex. 1:17, 20-21; Matt. 2:12-15).

- E. In the time of Roman persecution described in Revelation, the law said that "no man should be able to buy or to sell, save he that hath the mark" (Rev. 13:17). Did that require a Christian to refrain from all commercial activity and take to begging or growing their own crops? No, a Christian could continue to work and engage in business activity, avoiding governmental recrimination, since God authorized man to meet legitimate needs through such activity (Eph. 4:28; Acts 16:14; Jas. 4:13-15).

III. Historical Efforts Legislate Contrary to God's Law

- A. Throughout history, governments have demonstrated a propensity to enact law contrary to God's law.
- B. Communist China has issued a policy limiting every family to one child. All subsequent or unintended pregnancies are to be reported to the government which then forces the mother to have an abortion.
 - 1. Since having children is a liberty and it would not be the Christian who kills an unexpected child in abortion, would it be sinful for parents to flee or hide the child?
 - 2. Of course not, because the law forcing the situation is not a legitimate use of governmental power. God's law would require disobedience to this ungodly human edict (Rom. 1:28-32).
- C. The law in some totalitarian governments maintains the right of the state to be the legal parent of every child. (The present government of Cuba maintains this position.)
 - 1. If the state decides to take the child from the parents and give it to a homosexual or atheist couple, must the parent merely submit to the seizure or may they act to disobey the law to exercise their God-given right of being parents?
 - 2. Obviously, no government may so act and expect godly parents to submit to such unlawful tyranny. Godly parents would have the right and responsibility to violate such a law (Eph. 6:4; Prov. 22:6).
- D. Nazi Germany forbade marriage to those deemed undesirable.
 - 1. Would two young people living in a death camp have a God-given right to join in marriage though such was illegal according to that government?
 - 2. Yes, because the law forbidding marriage was not an authorized use of civil power (1 Cor. 7:2).
- E. During the time of legalized slavery, laws in some areas denied the right of slaves to marry because they were viewed as property without such legal rights.
 - 1. Did man's law nullify the God-given right to marry in keeping with His law?
 - 2. Obviously not. God's law is not nullified by the illegitimate exercise of power whether by individual or government (1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Tim. 4:1-3).
- F. Over the past year, governmental authorities in the United States (federal, state and local) have issued judgments and decrees that conflict with God's law by granting recognition and acceptance to the practice of homosexual acts and "same-sex marriage."
 - 1. The stage for the present situation actually began to be set when the so-called "hate speech" laws were passed several years ago forbidding any communication that referred to homosexuality or those who practice such in a condemnatory fashion. Some believe that any sermon which affirms the inspired statements of Scripture about homosexuality would be in violation of the law.
 - 2. In June of 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the sodomy laws of Texas and, by implication, other states as well in the *Lawrence v. Texas* case. At the same time, they revisited and overturned the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* ruling which held that homosexual acts did not deserve the same level of protection as heterosexual relationships. The court found sodomy laws to be "unconstitutional."
 - a. Historically, the bizarre nature of this ruling is readily apparent when one remembers a simple fact — when the Constitution of this country was written (the

same Constitution that the present Supreme Court finds to be inconsistent with sodomy laws), all 13 states had laws making sodomy a criminal offense. It remained a crime when all of those states ratified the Bill of Rights. It even remained a crime while all of the Supreme Court justices were in school studying constitutional law. Sodomy was a crime going all the way back to English common law which provided foundation to our laws.

- b. Those laws were largely based upon Mosaic law where homosexuality was condemned as unlawful in the same context and even with much the same wording as adultery, obscenity, prostitution, incest, pedophilia and bestiality (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Deut. 23:17). Historically, those governments that have respected the same fundamental principles of morality have maintained laws punishing those behaviors as well.
 - c. If the Supreme Court now is consistent with its ruling, it will strike down every law against consensual acts of adultery, obscenity, prostitution, incest, pedophilia or bestiality. Justices Scalia, Rehnquist and Thomas noted that consequence as well as the fact that the Court's ruling destroyed the only rational ground prohibiting homosexual marriage in this country. Sadly, but predictably, it did not take long for a major point of their warning to become a reality.
3. In November of 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled "that barring an individual from the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage solely because that person would marry a person of the same sex violates the Massachusetts Constitution."
 - a. In a 4-3 decision in the *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* case, the majority took it upon themselves to require the recognition of homosexual marriage as equally valid and deserving the same benefits as a marriage between a man and a woman.
 - b. The decision opened with this paragraph: "Marriage is a vital social institution. The exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other nurtures love and mutual support; it brings stability to our society. For those who choose to marry, and for their children, marriage provides an abundance of legal, financial, and social benefits. In return it imposes weighty legal, financial, and social obligations. The question before us is whether, consistent with the Massachusetts Constitution, the Commonwealth may deny the protections, benefits, and obligations conferred by civil marriage to two individuals of the same sex who wish to marry. We conclude that it may not. The Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second-class citizens. In reaching our conclusion we have given full deference to the arguments made by the Commonwealth. But it has failed to identify any constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriage to same-sex couples."
 - c. In the body of the decision, the four judges cited judicial and legal precedents that supposedly justified their ruling. This part of their catastrophic decision was the most disturbing to read.
 - (1) To build their base, they appealed to a variety of legal and judicial decrees that forbade moral judgments in public policy.
 - (2) The "no fault" divorce law changes of the past century were used to set the stage by showing the legislative intent to ban moral judgments in the realm of family formation and dissolution.
 - (3) They noted decrees excluding the use of moral judgments as factors in determining the fitness of prospective parents in adoption or custody cases.
 - (4) This led them to conclude that adultery, homosexuality or other behavior could not be condemned in public policy as "immoral."
 - (5) They cited the *Roe v. Wade* case making abortion legal as another example of the right of individuals to engage in action deemed immoral by others and forbidding the government from condemning such acts.
 - (6) Then, as any thinking person could have predicted, the four justices appealed

to the *Lawrence v. Texas* case decided by the United States Supreme Court last summer overruling the Texas sodomy laws. They quoted that decision's fundamental principle which held, "Our obligation is to define the liberty of all, not to mandate our own moral code." With that ruling, the last piece of an immoral mosaic was set in place.

- (7) One cannot discerningly read the *Goodridge* ruling without understanding the process underway for over a generation to "call evil good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20 cf. Prov. 17:15). Our courts and legislatures have systematically abolished the God-given basis of morality from our legal system and have replaced it with an officially sanctioned and even lauded amoral "legal" system.
 - d. At the same time that the court denied appeals to moral right and wrong in the above cases, they sought to justify their decision by appealing to the immorality of racism and segregation, attempting to parallel the rejection of black Americans with rejection of homosexuality. Yet, removal of racial discrimination was moral because it submitted to God's righteous order: "God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:34-35 see also Rom. 10:12). However, while God condemns racial or ethnic distinctions, He ordained and demands distinctions between righteous and wicked conduct. While some have tried to justify bigotry and racism by abusing God's law, their efforts are without defense to all who depend on God's word, not human opinion, as the standard for defining right and wrong. But how does God define the nature of homosexual action? God made that point crystal clear in very plain language (Rom. 1:26-27, 33; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:10; Gen. 19:4-11; Jude 7; Lev. 18:22-30; 20:13; 1 Kgs. 14:22-24; 15:11-12; 22:46; 2 Kgs. 23:7).
 - e. When one reads the whole ruling, it becomes clear how the pieces of our moral decline all fit together. Thanks to our courts overruling the origin of marriage, its legal definition for hundreds of years in English common law and common sense, we now face the very real possibility that "same sex marriages" may soon have the force of law to validate their acceptability.
4. In recent weeks, a growing number of local officials have decided to issue marriage licenses to "same-sex couples" and provide for ceremonies to "solemnize" their vows. Even if all of those "marriages" are held to be invalid, legal "homosexual marriages" will soon have official recognition by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as mandated by their Supreme Court.
 5. The legal recognition and acceptance of homosexual marriages as a civil right deserving of governmental protection will present numerous problems that Christians need to consider:
 - a. How will we react to calls for a "softer approach" to preaching on the subject in order not to offend a more tolerant society?
 - b. Will the possibility of law suits, civil rights actions, loss of tax exempt status or other fears cause us to modify our preaching?
 - c. If gospel preachers refuse to perform a marriage ceremony for licensed homosexuals, what will be the reaction of the government?
 - d. If churches refuse to accept a homosexual couple, will they be in danger of civil action?
 - e. If a man is "divorced" by his homosexual partner and later changes, seeking a wife as God intended, is he to be considered a "put away" party having no right to marry?

Conclusion:

We do not need more justices and legislators widening their destructive path, "but by men of understanding and knowledge the state thereof shall be prolonged" (Prov. 28:2). As Nineveh of old repented at the preaching of Jonah, let us unashamedly and boldly proclaim the standard of righteousness and call upon our people and leaders to repent! The destruction of any nation that sanctions immorality is certain. It may already be too late, but it is certainly not too early to let our voices and votes be heard! If we remain silent and inactive, what kind of society

will we leave for our children and grandchildren? As Christians and citizens of this country, what could be a more important issue upon which we should determine our votes than who will uphold basic moral concepts? Brethren, it is past time for us to raise our voices, ballots and efforts in defense of righteousness and opposition to evil! God gave the charge to Israel which we would do well in our time to heed: ***"Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and declare unto My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sin"*** (Isa. 58:1). As the laws of our society come to be more and more in conflict with God's word, we must commit ourselves to "obey God rather than men" no matter what the cost!

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