

Jonathan Mayhew

“Assertor of the Civil and Religious Liberties of his Country and Mankind”

A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers

1750 ___ Excerpts

PREFACE

The ensuing discourse is the last of three upon the same subject, with some little alterations and additions. It is hoped that but few will think the subject of it an improper one to be discoursed on in the pulpit, under a notion that this is preaching politics instead of CHRIST. However, to remove all prejudices of this sort, I beg it may be remembered that “all scripture – is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for CORRECTION, for instruction in righteousness.”¹ Why, then, should not those parts of scripture which relate to civil govern-ment be examined and explained from the desk as well as others? Obedience to the civil magistrate is a christian duty: and if so, why should not the nature, grounds and extent of it be considered in a christian assembly? . . .

. . . Those nations who are now groaning under the iron scepter of tyranny were once free. So they might probably have remained by a seasonable caution against despotic measures. Civil tyranny is usually small in its beginning, like “the drop of a bucket”² till at length, like a mighty torrent or the raging waves of the sea, it bears down all before it and deluges whole countries and empires. . . .

. . . Tyranny brings ignorance *and* brutality along with it. It degrades men from their just rank into the class of brutes. It damps their spirits. It suppresses arts. It extinguishes every spark of noble ardor and generosity in the breasts of those who are enslaved by it. It makes naturally-strong and great minds, feeble and little; and triumphs over the ruins of virtue and humanity. This is true of tyranny in every shape. There can be nothing great and good where its influence reaches. For which reason it becomes every friend to truth and human kind, every lover of God and the christian religion, to bear a part in opposing this hateful monster. It was desire to contribute a mite towards carrying on a war against this common enemy, that produced the following discourse. And if it serve in any measure to keep up a spirit of civil and religious liberty amongst us, my end is answered. – There are virtuous and candid men in all sects;

American Antiquarian Society

Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, etching by Giovanni Cipriani, London, 1767

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¹2 Timothy 3:16.

² Isaiah 40:15.

all such are to be esteemed. There are also vicious men and bigots in all sects, and all such ought to be despised.

³Book of Romans, Ch. 13, verses 1-8; in the New Testament of the Bible.

*“ To virtue only and her friends, a friend;
The world beside may murmur or commend.
Know all the distant din that world can keep
Rolls o’er my grotto, and but soothes my sleep.”*

[Alexander] Pope

Jonathan Mayhew

Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers

ROM. XIII. 1:—8.³

1. *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers For there is no power but of God: the powers that be, are ordained of God.*
2. *Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist, shall receive to themselves damnation.*
3. *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:*
4. *For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil.*
5. *Wherefore ye must needs to be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.*
6. *For, for this cause pay you tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.*
7. *Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom, to whom custom; fear, to whom fear; honour, to whom honour.*

After quoting the verses from St. Paul’s letters to the Romans, in the New Testament of the Bible, Mayhew summarizes the apostle’s position on man’s duty to obey governmental rulers.

The apostle’s doctrine, in the passage thus explained, concerning the office of civil rulers and the duty of subjects [the people] may be summed up in the following observations;

THAT the end of magistracy is the good of civil society, *as such*:

THAT civil rulers, *as such*, are the ordinance and ministers of God; it being by his permission and providence that any bear rule; and agreeable to his will, that there should be *some persons* vested with authority in society, for the well-being of it:

THAT which is here said concerning civil rulers, extends to all of them in common: it relates indifferently to monarchical, republican and aristocratical government; and to all other forms which truly answer the sole end of government, the happiness of society; and to all the different degrees of authority in any particular slate; to inferior officers no less than to the supreme:

THAT disobedience to civil rulers in the due exercise of their authority, is not merely a *political* sin, but an heinous *offence against God and religion*:

THAT the true ground and reason of our obligation to be subject to the *higher powers*, is the usefulness of magistracy (when properly exercised) to human society, and its subserviency to the general welfare:

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THAT obedience to civil rulers is here equally required under all forms of government, which answer the sole end of all government, the good of society; and to every degree of authority in any state, whether supreme or subordinate:

(From whence it follows,

THAT if unlimited obedience and non-resistance be here required as a duty under any one form of government, it is also required as a duty under all other forms; and as a duty to subordinate rulers as well as to the supreme.)

AND lastly, that those civil rulers to whom the apostle enjoins subjection, are the persons *in possession; the powers that be*; those who are actually *vested* with authority.

THERE is one very important and interesting point which remains to be inquired into; namely, the *extent* of that subjection *to the higher powers*, which is here enjoined as a duty upon all christians. Some have thought it warrantable and glorious to disobey the civil powers in certain circumstances; and, in cases of very great and general oppression, when humble remonstrances fail of having any effect; and when the publick welfare cannot be otherwise provided for and secured, to rise unanimously even against the sovereign himself in order to redress their grievances; to vindicate their natural and legal rights: to break the yoke of tyranny and free themselves and posterity from inglorious servitude and ruin. . . .

But in opposition to this principle, it has often been asserted that the scripture in general (and the passage under consideration in particular) makes all resistance to princes a crime in any case whatever – If they turn tyrants and become the common oppressors of those whose welfare they ought to regard with a paternal affection, we must not pretend to right ourselves unless it be by prayers and tears and humble entreaties. And if these methods fail of producing redress, we must not have recourse to any other, but all suffer ourselves to be robbed and butchered at the pleasure of the *Lord's anointed*: lest we should incur the sin of rebellion and the punishment of damnation. For he has God's authority and commission to bear him out in the worst of crimes, so far that he may not be withstood or controled. Now whether we are obliged to yield such an absolute submission to our prince, or whether disobedience and resistance may not be justifiable in some cases, notwithstanding anything in the passage before us, is an inquiry in which we are all concerned; and this is the inquiry which is the main design of the present discourse. . . .

Transition

I now add, farther, that the apostle's argument is so far from proving it to be the duty of people to obey and submit to such rulers as act in contradiction to the public good, and so to the design of their office, that it proves *the direct contrary*. For, please to observe, that if the end of all civil government be the good of society; if this be the thing this is aimed at in constituting civil rulers, and if the motive and argument for submission to government be taken from the apparent usefulness of civil authority; it follows, that when no such good end can be answered by submission, there remains no argument or motive to enforce it; if instead of this good end's being brought about by submission, a *contrary end* is brought about, and the ruin and misery of society effected by it, here is a plain and positive reason against submission in all such cases, should they every happen. . . . Suppose God requires a family of children to obey their father and not to resist him; and enforces his command with this argument; that the superintendence and care and authority of a just and kind parent will contribute to the happiness of the whole family; so that they ought to obey him for their own sakes more than for his. Suppose this parent at length runs distracted and attempts, in his mad fit, to cut all his children's throats. Now, in this case, is not the reason before assigned, why these children should obey their parent while he continued of a sound mind, namely, *their common good*, a reason equally conclusive for disobeying and resisting him, since he

“whether disobedience and resistance may not be justifiable in some cases . . . is an inquiry in which we are all concerned; and this is the inquiry which is the main design of the present discourse [essay].”

National Humanities Center ⓘ Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, sermon, 1750, excerpts. 3

is become delirious and attempts their ruin? It makes no alteration in the argument whether this parent, properly speaking, loses his reason; or does, while he retains his understanding, that which is as fatal in its consequences as any thing he could do, were he really deprived of it. This similitude needs no formal application. . . .

If we calmly consider the nature of the thing itself, nothing can well be imagined more directly contrary to common sense than to suppose that *millions* of people should be subjected to the arbitrary, precarious pleasure of *one single man* (who has *naturally* no superiority over them in point of authority) so that their estates, and everything that is valuable in life, and even their lives also, shall be absolutely at his disposal, if he happens to be wanton and capricious enough to demand them. What unprejudiced man can think that God made ALL to be thus subservient to the lawless pleasure and frenzy of ONE, so that it shall always be a sin to resist him! Nothing but the most plain and express revelation from heaven could make a sober impartial man believe such a monstrous, unaccountable doctrine, and, indeed, the thing itself appears so shocking – so out of all *proportion* that it may be questioned whether all the *miracles* that ever were wrought, could make it credible that this doctrine *really* came from God. At present there is not the least syllable in scripture which gives any countenance to it. . . .

But then, if unlimited submission and passive obedience to the *higher powers*, in all possible cases, be not a duty, it will be asked, “HOW far are we obliged to submit? If we may innocently disobey and resist in some crises, why not in all? Where shall we stop? What is the measure of our duty? . . .”

To conclude: Let us all learn to be *free*, and to be *loyal*. Let us not profess ourselves vassals to the lawless pleasure of any man on earth. But let us remember, at the same time, government is *sacred* and not to be *trifled* with. It is our happiness to live under the government of a PRINCE who is satisfied with ruling according to law, as every other *good prince* will – We enjoy under his administration all the liberty that is proper and expedient for us. It becomes us, therefore, to be contented and dutiful subjects. Let us prize our freedom, but not *use our liberty for a cloak of maliciousness*. There are men who strike at *liberty* under the term *licentiousness*. There are others who aim at *popularity* under the disguise of *patriotism*. Be aware of both. *Extremes* are dangerous. There is at present amongst *us*, perhaps, more danger of the *latter* than of the *former*. For which reason I would exhort you to pay all due Regard to the government over us; to the KING and all in authority, and to *lead a quiet and peaceable life*. – And while I am speaking of loyalty to our *earthly Prince*, suffer me just to put you in mind to be loyal also to the supreme RULER of the universe, *by whom kings reign and princes decree justice*. To which king eternal immortal, invisible, even to the ONLY WISE GOD, be all honor and praise, DOMINION and thanksgiving, through JESUS CHRIST our LORD. AMEN.

“What unprejudiced man can think that God made ALL to be thus subservient to the lawless pleasure and frenzy of ONE, so that it shall always be a sin to resist him!”

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