

Jonathan Mayhew

1720 – 1766

Born	Chilmark, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts
Education	Harvard College
Occupation	Congregationalist minister, West Church, Boston
Key Sermon	A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission (1750)
Legacy	Theological architect of American resistance; credited by John Adams as foundational to the Revolution

“It is blasphemy to call tyrants and oppressors God's ministers.”

— Jonathan Mayhew, A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission, 1750

The Man

Jonathan Mayhew was a Congregationalist minister in Boston whose 1750 sermon was one of the most politically explosive documents in pre-Revolutionary America. John Adams later credited it, along with a handful of other works, as one of the intellectual foundations of the Revolution.

Mayhew was the son of a minister and graduated from Harvard, where he absorbed both rigorous theology and Enlightenment political thought — and wove them together into something distinctly American. He was not a firebrand. He was a careful reasoner, and his argument was built not on political passion but on a precise reading of Scripture.

He died in 1766 at forty-five — a decade before the Declaration he helped make possible. He never saw what his thinking produced. But the men who wrote that Declaration had read him carefully.

The Sermon

A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission is a systematic theological examination of Romans 13 — the passage that commands Christians to obey governing authorities. The question Mayhew asked was the one the Church had long avoided: Does that obedience have limits?

His answer was yes — and he argued it from the text itself. Authority is ordained by God, he said, for the good of the people. The whole point of legitimate government is to protect the innocent and punish evil. When rulers reverse that purpose — when they become the source of injustice rather than the remedy for it — they have stepped outside the mandate God gave them. They are no longer exercising God's authority. They are abusing it.

Resistance in that case is not rebellion. It is faithfulness. Mayhew was precise about the standard: the bar is high, the process must be exhausted, and the cause must be just. He was not licensing every grievance. He was establishing a principle: God's authority stands over all human authority. Caesar is not ultimate.

The Legacy

Mayhew's argument became the theological backbone of American political thought. The Declaration of Independence's claim that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed — and that the governed have the right to alter or abolish governments that fail their purpose — is Mayhew's argument in political language.

His core conviction — that liberty is a gift from God, not a grant from government — is what makes the Declaration's appeal to the Creator something more than rhetoric. If rights come from God, no man can permanently remove them. If rights come from government, government can redefine them.

Fifteen years after Mayhew preached this sermon, the Stamp Act crisis erupted. The colonists did not reach for weapons first. They reached for arguments. Many of those arguments had Mayhew's fingerprints on them.

Why This Matters for Bible X

Day 4 gives young men a framework for thinking about authority that will serve them the rest of their lives. The question is not whether to obey — it is what obedience to God actually requires when the commands of men and the commands of God come into conflict.

Mayhew's answer is not a license for defiance. It is a call to develop a conscience sharp enough to tell the difference between serving God and serving self — and to be willing to pay the cost when those two things diverge.