

“God-centered Submission to Godless Men”

I Peter 2:13-20

November 3, 2019

We only have to listen to the news and read this passage on the same day to see the relevance of the problem we face. Even in the best nation in the world, God’s purpose for government is far from ideal and it puts us in a quandary: *how do we live lives with uncompromising obedience to God under God-ordained governing authority that has in many ways abandoned its own divine purpose?*

Imagine Peter’s original audience struggling with this issue. They want to live in obedience to God under a government that is persecuting them for their faith and obedience to Christ. Are they free to abandon all responsibility to the Roman government under Nero’s evil leadership? Or does their obedience to God have a bearing on their obedience to a God-defying government?

We left on in chapter 2 last week with vs. 12 where Peter exhorted us, *“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.”*

The first aspect of excellent behavior that Peter specifically points us to is a life of submission to those in authority. The question before us today is, *how do we navigate our obedience to secular rulers when they stand in opposition to God’s law?*

Our passage is heavily thematic. For example, we have the theme of submission which is the basic issue at hand (see vs. 13, 18). We also have the theme of doing what is right—living a righteous, God-pleasing life (see vs. 14, 15, 20, **24**). Yet the strongest theme, which should dominate our vision is the God-centered motivation for how we live in a world that generally disregards God’s authority. Let me show you this theme:

*13 Submit yourselves **for the Lord's sake** to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,*

14 or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

*15 For such is the **will of God** that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.*

*16 Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as **bondslaves of God.***

*17 Honor all men; love the brotherhood, **fear God**, honor the king.*

18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.

*19 For this finds favor, if for the sake of **conscience toward God** a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.*

*20 For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds **favor with God.***

Our lives are to be so radically and practically God-centered, that our response to all people is to be based on God’s character and will rather than on man’s character and conduct. In other words, we need to make it our habit to respond to God rather than reacting to people. *The key to maintaining our witness in a world that maligns us, is living in response to God rather than people.*

As we unpack vs. 13-20, Peter gives us 6 aspects of a God-honoring life of submission to human authority:

1. **The command to live a submissive life** (13a).

[13-14] Here Peter issues an unmistakably clear command to submit ourselves to governing authority. We may ultimately belong to the Lord as God’s people, a holy nation under His authority, aliens and strangers in this world, but that does not mean we can neglect submission to earthly authority simply because we claim higher submission to the authority of God. Rather, we honor God’s authority by yielding to the lower structures of human authority that He was established for proper order in our world.

Paul takes this a step further in Romans 13 when he clarifies that **“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinances of God...” (Romans 13:1-2).**

Now of course it gets more complicated when governing authorities themselves disobey God. But the first point that we must establish is that believers are commanded to live exemplary lives of submission. In fact, as we survey the NT we can see that submission is an essential aspect of every believer’s life; younger men to older men, citizens to government, wives to husbands, slaves to masters, church members to church leaders, and all people to God. And as we shall see next week at the end of chapter 2, Christ is our ultimate example in His submission to the Father, establishing that a life of godly submission is an honorable life in the highest degree.

2. The motive for a submissive life: “for the Lord’s sake” (13b).

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake...” (13). Notice, that the motivating factor is not to just to submit when it benefits us or even when it is good for us. We are not to submit for our sake, but for the Lord’s sake. In our submission to earthly rulers, we represent God and we model Christ who never led a single revolt against the perverse government under which He lived.

Jesus’s vision (and that of the NT writers) was not to transform culture by means of forcefully overhauling social structures, but rather to see the hearts of men made new by the gospel. Certainly, there is a place for us to speak and stand for righteousness regarding matters of government, but the point that Peter is making first, is that submitting ourselves to governing authority is meant to serve God’s purposes. Our motivation is that we serve God by submitting to civil authority.

3. The extent of a submissive life (13c-14).

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.”

The idea here is that every level of civil authority is to be honored by followers of Christ. This includes things like paying taxes and following the laws and ordinances of the land.

Notice that in vs. 14, Peter points to one of the key purposes of government to punish evildoers and to uphold those who do right. It’s important to see that government’s authority is not *carte blanche* (free reign).

It is obvious from this passage that we are not to view or honor human governments as having absolute authority. They are under God’s ultimate authority. And so the believer is not only commanded to submit to governing authorities to the degree that he can, he is also called to do what is right, even when the cost is suffering.

So what do we do when obeying governing authorities would put us in direct conflict with obeying God’s authority? We honor the higher authority of God.

Life Principle: Believers should do everything they can to serve, honor, and obey those in authority over them and only disobey (respectfully so) when obedience to human authority would cause them to personally sin in disobedience to God.

Peter and John themselves faced this dilemma in Acts 4-5. They did not resist arrest for preaching the gospel nor did they stop preaching even though severely threatened because they knew that to stop preaching Christ would directly violate their personal obedience to God.

They respectfully said to the authorities, **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge, for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).** After being imprisoned and again threatened upon release, they again said, **“We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).**

Remember, that these are the very authorities that crucified Jesus. There was great risk in choosing to obey God over men. Yet they did not rebel simply because the government was corrupt in their use of God-given authority. It was not until their submission to man's authority would cause them to specifically and personally sin that they refused to obey man in order to obey God. (gov's misuse of our taxes vs. personal sin)

4. **The reason for a submissive life** (15).

"For such is the will of God, that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men" (15).

It is God's will for them to do what is right—and the primary meaning of doing right in this passage, is honoring governing authority to extent that one can without dishonoring God. It is God's will that as you live an obedient, law-abiding life, you will silence the ignorance of foolish men. That is, those who would falsely slander believers (see vs. 12).

"By submitting to government, Christians demonstrate that they are good citizens, not anarchists"¹ as they had been accused for calling Christ their king rather than the emperor.

We are called to live an exemplary life of citizenship on earth, because our lives are ultimately guided by the overarching authority of God.

5. **The attitude of godly submission** (16-17).

[16-17] In vs. 16, Peter wants to make sure that we don't go too far in either direction, of rebelling against legitimate authority or falling into servitude to wayward authority. He says, "act as free man." Don't take on a servile attitude. You are not a slave to any human government. You are free in Christ, free to do what is right. Yet don't use your freedom as an excuse to unnecessarily rebel against those in authority. Rather you are to see yourself as a bond slave of God—bound to obey and honor Him. Much of the time that will mean honoring the authority He has sovereignly ordained and allowed to be over us and sometimes it will mean obeying God in

opposition to governing authority. In other words, we are free to honor God in our submission and we are free to honor God when obedience to Him requires us to disobey man.

Then in vs. 17, Peter specifies not only what our actions but what our attitude should be.

- a. *Honor all people.* We are to regard every person with respect and relate to them with selfless consideration to their needs and interests above our own. Not every person is honorable or respectable, but that's not the point. The point is not to relate to people on the basis of their character and conduct as much as on the basis of God's character and will.

In other words, we are to honor all people by being an honorable person, giving honor out of an honorable life. Don't let the other person's character dictate your character. Your character is to be dictated by God. Even to the worst of humanity we can say with our attitude and conduct, "because Christ is in my and I am in Christ, I will relate to you in the spirit of Christ as a fellow image bearer of God."

- b. *Love the brotherhood.* We go a step beyond honor in the body of Christ. We love one another, affectionally and sacrificially. Love serves. Love cares. Love sacrifices. Love rejoices. Love reveals the life and heart of God within us. Jesus said, "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).
- c. *Fear God.* Notice that God is the only one who is to be feared. He alone is deserving of absolute obedience, absolute reverence, whole-hearted love, limitless trust. The fear of God does not paralyze us. It compels us to honor every person created in the image of God. It compels us to love our brothers

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1,2 Peter, Jude*. Pg. 130.

and sisters in Christ from the heart. It frees us to obey God, not fearing man even if that man be the emperor himself.

- d. *Honor the king.* I think that the point of this last, anti-climactic phrase in vs. 17 is to remind us that while the highest governing authority is to be regarded with honor, it is not to be feared. The king/emperor is not God. He is to be obeyed (or disobeyed) as subject to our obedience to God.

In vs. 18, Peter now re-issues the command to live a submissive life in a more specific context of slaves to masters: “*Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable*”—*those who are harsh. Even harsh masters, even unreasonable employers need to see the witness of those who serve them with the excellence of a Christ-like life of virtue.*

While Peter is not condoning slavery in the way we think of slavery², neither does he urge an uprising among slaves. Actually he urges slaves to live out Christlike, godly submission that reflects the indwelling life of Christ.

6. The reward for godly submission in the face of injustice (19-20).

[vs. 19-20] Verses 19 and 20 begin and end with the same phrase: “This finds favor...with God” The Greek word that Peter uses is actually the word *grace* (charis), but in this context it carries the idea of *reward*.

Peter is saying that when for the sake of maintaining a clear conscience before God, our right behavior (our obedience to God) is paid back with unjust suffering, those sorrows that we carry will one day be cashed in for godly reward.

² “Those who are familiar with slavery from the history of the United States must beware of imposing our historical experience on NT times since slavery in the Greco-Roman world was not based on race and American slave owners discouraged education of slaves...” In NT times “people became slaves by being captured in wars, kidnapped, or born into a slave household. Those facing economic hard times might choose to sell themselves into slavery in order to survive. Many slaves lived

patiently enduring discipline for sinful behavior does not earn us favor with God—we just get what we deserve, but when we patiently endure suffering for doing what is right in God’s eyes, it is favorable in His eyes and will not go unrewarded.

Life Principle: Those who suffer unjustly for doing what honors God will be honored by God.

Peter doesn’t specifically explain what the reward will be, but as we will see next week He does go on to point us to Christ who is the perfect example of a life so radically and practically God-centered, that He responded to all people on the basis of His Father’s will and character rather than man’s character and conduct.

Phil 2 tells us that after Jesus obeyed His Father’s will “to the point of death, even death on a cross, God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:8-11).

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning, this is the Savior we follow. He leads us to a life of humble submission, where we die to self in order to live for God. And while He calls us to follow Him in His death, and the world repays us with suffering, our unwavering hope is that we will one day reign with Christ and the reward of our Father’s favor will be our joy.

“For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps...” (1Pet 2:21-25).

- “*He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.*” So we follow Him by confessing our sin and forsaking the deception of

miserably, particularly those who served in mines. Other slaves, however, served as doctors, teachers, managers, musicians, artisans, and could even own other slaves. I would not be unusual for a slave to be better educated than the master....Still, slaves in the Greco-Roman world were under the control of their masters...” (Thomas Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1,2 Peter, Jude*. Pg. 135).

our hearts and words that have dishonored God by dishonoring one another.

- *“While being reviled, He did not revile in return, while suffering He uttered no threats.”* So we follow Him by forsaking all bitterness and malice in our hearts; laying down resentment, hatred and jealousy toward others.
- Just as Jesus entrusted Himself to the Father’s righteous judgment, so we entrust ourselves to God by doing what is right, even when it is repaid with temporary suffering in this world, knowing that God’s favor lasts forever. What hard choice of obedience do you need to make today?

“Jesus Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep,” but now return to the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul. Come under the refuge of His loving authority.

- Let us come to the Lord’s table with honest examination of our hearts. *Are you under the authority of Christ, with your obedience, with your submission? Are you standing in His gracious favor with an obedient, undivided heart?*

[The Lord’s supper is for all those who come with a repentant, believing heart. If you do not claim Jesus as Lord or if you have unresolved sin in your life, please let the elements pass.]

Communion:

- **Bread: Isaiah 30:18** – God has fulfilled this longing to be gracious to you in sending His Son to bear your sin so that you could bear His grace.
- **Cup: I Pet 1:17-21** - *And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your*

forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”