

## Good Citizens for God's Mission | 1 Peter 2:13-17

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This morning we are continuing our study of 1 Peter, focusing on 2:13-17.

*[13] Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, [14] or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. [15] For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. [16] Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. [17] Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

Through this passage God has a lot to teach us about our relationship with authority. He has a lot to say about how we should think about governments, how we should speak about our leaders, and how we should care about civic responsibility as followers of Jesus Christ. We are living at time where we could certainly use God's perspective on these sort of things, so I hope and pray His message from these few verses will offer each of us some clarity on how our faith and civic responsibility relate.

Over the past few weeks, as we've studied 1 Peter, we've been able to surmise that the Christians who originally received this letter had suffered from a great deal of hardship in their lives.

Peter makes it clear that all these believers were experiencing hostility and at times persecution from people in their communities who were suspicious of the Christian faith. The readers of 1 Peter, not unlike believers around the world today, were criticized, mocked, and occasionally falsely accused of being troublesome and rebellious. The things they believed about themselves and their God clashed with the people and culture around them...and in response the people and culture around them lashed out with anger, violence, and hatred.

So, Peter writes to them, and reminds them about how their faith in Christ has given them eternal life and an inheritance "that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept for [them] in heaven" by the God who loves them. Peter says all who follow Christ are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own possession who have been set aside and lifted up to declare the excellencies and glory of God. We are sojourners and exiles on this earth. Our true homes are in heaven, and we each long for the day we get to finally go home. (2:9-12)

But that leaves us with the question...what are we to do while we wait? How are we to live? If this place, this world, this country, this terrific little city of Manhattan, KS is not truly our home...then how should we relate to and interact with the people and institutions all around us? (Especially when they don't seem to like us very much)

Peter's answer to that question is a bit surprising: "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution*". It is astounding that this could be his position on a Christian's civic role and responsibility. Peter had watched helplessly as the governing authorities of Rome and his own Jewish people falsely accused, condemned, and executed Jesus. Peter had stood bravely before accusers of his own, been beaten for his belief in the resurrection of Christ, and spent time in prison for his preaching.

Peter knew that human institutions suffered from sin and corruption yet still he counseled Christians, "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution*." We're left wondering, "why?" What possible good

could come from obeying authorities that do not honor or acknowledge the sovereignty of God? That's the question we'll be considering to day as we study this passage.

### **God's Plan to Love and Redeem the World:**

So, let's get started by taking a closer look at vv. 13-14a, "[13] *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, [14] or to governors...*"

The first thing we have to deal with is the meaning of that discomforting little word: *submit* (or, as translated by the ESV, "be subject to"). The idea of submission gets under our skin and clashes with our tendency to be anti-authority. As children we hated hearing, "do it because I said so." As adults we've learned to challenge the do's and don'ts of authority because we have a creeping suspicion that there is something inherently untrustworthy about people and institutions who have power over other people. It's why we write, read, watch stories like 1984 and The Hunger Games, and enjoy the may versions of the good rebellion triumphing over the evil empire.

In v. 13 "submit" or "be subject to" comes from the greek word *hypotasso*, meaning "to order oneself according to a given relationship" and was often used in reference to relationships that involved some kind of authority: soldiers to their commanders, citizens to their governments, and as we will see in the coming weeks relationships within the home.

*Hypotasso* does mean "to obey", but not in a blind, unquestioning sort of way. It is instead more in line with the idea of a voluntary, cooperative, willing kind of obedience. This kind of submission is meant to establish a mutually beneficial relationship, with both parties serving one another. The idea here is to reasonably and sacrificially obey human authority in order to keep the peace and help that authority accomplish its God-given task (which will look at in just a moment in v. 14)

Submission, therefore, is an act of service. It's a way to serve our city commissioners, our governor, our state legislatures, our congressional representatives, and yes even our President...**BUT**...our service and obedience to them is SECONDARY to our submission to God. Peter bases his entire argument for being subject to human authority NOT on the authorities themselves, but on God, "*for the Lord's sake*".

This is so, so important. This is what can change this passage from a frustrating burden to something that's actually kind of exciting. If obeying human authority is for the Lord's sake, that means it has a profound purpose. In Scripture, things that are done "for the Lord's sake" are things that are related to redemption, transformation, and the advancement of the Kingdom of God. So what Peter is saying is that our reasonable, cooperative, sacrificial submission to the authorities of this world interlocks with our calling to be blessings, loving neighbors, Gospel proclaimers, and justice seekers.

***We are commanded to willingly submit to all civil authorities because by doing so we participate in one part of God's plan to love and redeem the world. (v. 13)***

Submitting to human institutions is part of carrying out His plan of redemption. Sometimes it's because obedience allows us to participate in society, care for those in need, and share the Gospel. Sometimes it's because as participating citizens we can call out injustice and fight for what we believe is right. But if we're only ever rebellious, only bitter, and seek to make a name for ourselves because of the laws we hate and break...then the watching world will begin to associate those negative traits with our faith and

our God. We'll distract people from God's commitment to redemption, and miss opportunities to create change.

***We are commanded to willingly submit to all civil authorities because by doing so we participate in one part of God's plan to love and redeem the world.*** In Peter's day this meant emperors and regional governors. In our society it means our elected officials, appointed public servants, law enforcement, and others who help establish order in our daily lives. We must seek to voluntarily, cooperatively, and at times sacrificially submit to legitimate, though certainly flawed, human institutions. Our conduct, obedience, and at times civil disobedience could be a catalyst for more justice, grace, and mercy in our world. And it might just lead people to see God in a way they never have before.

Peter goes on to explain how that might work in the next few verses. Turning back to the text, we go on to verse 14...

### **The Role of Government and Our Role of Support:**

*[13] Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, [14] or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.*

Believe it or not, the God-given purpose of government is to punish evildoers and uphold what is good. It may not always be very good at it...it may at times be downright lousy at it...nevertheless, God's expectation is that the leaders of people pursue what is in the best interest of people according to God's understanding of goodness, justice, and law.

While preaching on this same passage Pastor John Piper gave a great summary of what this verse is getting at:

*The proper aim of government is to dam up the river of evil that flows from the heart of man so that it does not flood the world with anarchy. Governments **do not save**; they are to maintain external order in a world seething with evil so the saving message of the gospel can run and triumph on its own power.  
(John Piper, "Slaves of God: Free From all to Honor All" | May 29 1994*

It's important to remember that governments will never be perfect and cannot ultimately save people from sin. At best they mitigate evil and reward some good. They cannot overcome evil (only Christ can do that) and cannot eradicate evil (again, only Christ can do that). You can hope for a good government, **but you must never put ALL your hope in any government**. They are made up of sinners like you and me.

There are 535 members of the United States Congress. Every single one of them, in addition to struggling with sin the same as you and I do every day, must also try to legislate what is good and what is bad for a nation of over 320 million people who at times have 320 million different opinions about what is good and what is bad.

This does not absolve them of inaction or corruption. They are responsible for the things they do and do not do. But perhaps it brings a bit of grace-filled perspective: the job is hard. They'll never do it perfectly. And at times they'll lose sight of what is good and right. Which is exactly why God asks us to be good and active citizens. We, especially in a country as free as America, have a role to play in helping our government achieve the goal of punishing evil and doing good.

As followers of Christ we must understand that ***all civil authority is under God and exists to maintain justice, and needs our support in accomplishing that responsibility. (v. 14)***

The the Bible, people are not passive about the the actions or character of their government.

- Nearly all of the prophets were sent to warn the leaders of Israel seek justice, love mercy, and repent of corruption and injustice
- Esther used her position as Queen to stop the mass genocide of her people and remove laws that had been written to promote racism and hate
- The Apostle Paul used his time before the regional governor Felix to not only preach the Gospel but also call the man out for his corrupt political dealings and immoral relationships.

History is full of believers who were good citizens that also sought to help their governments better understand what is objectively right and objectively wrong. People like William Wilberforce, George Muller, Corrie Ten Boom, and Amy Carmichael changed people's perspectives on slavery, orphan care, forgiveness, and even state-sponsored prostitution.

These are all pretty big names, and it's pretty daunting to think about trying to have the impact any of these men and women did on their societies and governments. The good news is, God does not expect you to. If he wants to lead you into something that big, he most certainly will and you'll go right along for that ride. But there are more accessible and immediate things we can do to help the leaders of our governments and institutions.

***First, you can pray for people in positions of power and influence.***

- Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, instructs the young pastor to pray for all people, but especially for kings and leaders. Pray for their character, pray for their safety, pray that they themselves cry out to God for wise counsel.
- And as you pray...really trust that it can make a difference. God delights to act on our prayers. One of the most repeated messages of Scripture is that God hears our prayers and takes our requests seriously. It's the single most powerful thing we can do, because it causes us to seek and rely upon the power of the mighty and most powerful God. He's changed the fate of nations based on the prayers of his people. Take that responsibility seriously.
- So this week, I challenge you: pick a leader of our city, state, or nation and pray for him or her. They all have an incredible responsibility. Praying for them is one of the most decent and caring things you can do for them, and for the country. (And Christian -- you are supposed to be a decent and caring person)

***Second, take the time to have biblically-informed opinions about the issues we face as a society and how the candidates we elect feel about those issues.***

- The Bible has quite a bit to say on the topics of immigration, environmentalism, helping people suffering from poverty, the sanctity of life, and the role of individual rights (and many others). We have to take the time to let the Word of God form what we think about these things, and then figure out how we can reasonably and lovingly present those opinions to a secular government.
- I understand that this is really, really hard. Especially because Christians aren't even united on how we think about these things. So in addition to having prayerfully and biblically informed options, we need to be committed to respectful and open-minded discussions.

- You can be resolute about what you believe, but you must always remember that you are in fact capable of being wrong, in whole or in part. Be humble about the things you believe and the ways you communicate.
- My challenge for this point: If you feel strongly about a particular issue, but are unsure about how God feels about it...I beg you to find a way to think about through the Scriptures and in prayer. If you feel like you've got a pretty good handle on what the Bible says about it, seek out another believer and have a discussion about it. See what new thoughts get stirred up. Always be searching for the truthful yet compassionate response to the issues we face. If you need help with this, come find me, email me. **I am not an expert**, but I'd be happy to sit down together and work through things together.

As followers of Christ we must understand that ***all civil authority is under God and exists to maintain justice, and needs our support in accomplishing that responsibility. (v. 14)***

Another way we can help governments understand what is evil and good is by showing them what good looks like -- which is exactly what Peter tells us to do in v. 15.

### **It's Up To Us To Keep Doing Good:**

*[15] For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.*

I love this verse because it humbles me and reminds me of my own responsibility to do good in this world. Because no matter how good or how bad our government might be, as followers of Christ we all have our marching orders: we're to love God, love our neighbors, share the Gospel, and be committed to doing good deeds for all people.

Part of doing good deeds, according to Peter, is obeying the laws of the land. We may not like all the laws or the government that creates them. We may even strongly disagree with some of them. But if they do not cause us to sin or prevent us from sharing the Gospel then our ***submission to authority can create opportunities to do good, and the good we do has a chance of being seen by others and softening their hearts. (v. 15)***

One of the most powerful examples of this in the Bible comes from Acts 16. The Apostle Paul and another believer named Silas are thrown into a Roman prison on bogus charges of disturbing the peace. Paul and Silas spend the night in prison, passing the time by singing hymns and praying. A sudden earthquake rips the prison apart, opening an opportunity for Paul and Silas to flee for their freedom. Instead...they decide to obey the law and stay in what's left of their cells. By doing so they are able to prevent the guard from killing himself, share the Gospel with him, and end up baptizing the guard along with his entire household. Paul and Silas are set free the very next day.

Paul and Silas determined that instead of resisting arrest or trying to run away they would submit to human authority and see what God would do through that obedience. The result was a chance to do some incredibly good things, preach the Gospel, and save the guard and his family.

It's God's will that we change minds by doing good -- not by lashing out, not by pursuing violence or hatred, but by good deeds, kind words, and an understanding yet resolute commitment to the truth.

And not just a little bit of good. Peter wants us to do A LOT of good. “Doing good” is one of the most frequently repeated commands in this letter. We’re to be people that overflow with good works. We don’t just do the minimum. ***Why would you want to do the minimum of something that could help another person come to faith in Jesus Christ?*** Our obedience to authority has that potential, not in full but in part. If people only ever see Christians as rude, angry, discontented people...then they aren’t going to wonder what Jesus has to offer them. Because whatever it is clearly isn’t working for us.

Peter wants to be sure we understand is that our commitment to good works, the good deeds we do, might be seen by others and set the example for what “good” really is.

***So as followers of Christ let’s excel at doing good:***

- Let’s be charitable in our understanding of one another.
- Let’s be loving and gracious in all our political discussions.
- Let’s be resolute about what we believe is right, but never vicious, cruel, or insulting when we think someone else is wrong.
- Let’s do things like advocate for the rights of the oppressed, lead our culture in overcoming racism, and serve people who are struggling and lost.
- Let’s make part of our Christian reputation be that we are safe to come and talk to about what is moral, what is good, and might need to change in our society.

Take the opportunities you can to do good, because your doing good deeds and treating others well has a chance of being seen by others and softening their hearts.

That’s a lot to take on...and Peter’s not done yet. He goes on, but his next verse might actually do more to lighten the burden and heaviness you may be feeling:

**Using Our Freedom Like Christ Used His:**

***[16] Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.***

We belong to God. Our submission to governing authorities is always secondary to the total loyalty and allegiance we have to God and His will.

Therefore we willingly submit to all civil authorities ***because we are servants of God, fully committed to the mission of God, who seek to use our freedom like Christ used His. (v.16)***

We submit sacrificially. Knowing that sometimes we may be called to live in a way that causes us discomfort, but gives us an opportunity to rely upon God’s strength and share Christ with others.

We submit freely. Just as Christ humbled and emptied himself for the word, we too humble ourselves and take on the role of servants. We do this freely, joyfully, as an expression of our obedience to God.

As followers of Christ we do not seek to shape the government in such a way that secures our own comfort or benefits. We seek to shape it in such a way that it cares for others and allows us to continue sharing the Gospel.

That may very well require sacrifice. But we of all people should be willing to sacrifice for others, *because we of all people are really, truly free in a way that cannot be taken away*. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights do not forgive your sins or secure your place in eternity. Only the bloody cross and the empty tomb do that -- by directing us toward Christ, the author and perfecter of our forgiveness and faith.

We cannot be cruel. We cannot be unloving. We cannot be comfortable with injustice and claim Christlikeness.

We cannot be people who pride ourselves in our loyalty to political parties, media sources, or opinions defended with anger and hatred.

We must never use our faith as a way to cover up or justify evil or inaction. Our lives need to look like Jesus. They need to be full of sacrifice and freedom used to serve others.

They need to be characterized by the commands we find in v. 17:

### **What All This Looks Like:**

*[17] Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

In v. 17 honor really comes down to respect. We're commanded to respect everyone, including the emperor. Treat people fairly, do not slander or dehumanize them in any way. Christians should not be a people known for our witty insults or our biting, venomous public discourse. Yes, speak truth. But even as you do so remember that the person you're speaking to or speaking about is made in the image of God. If you insult or despise them...you are insulting someone God loves.

I have to repent of this pretty much every day. Our culture values and celebrates a quick wit and a humorous put-down. God values hearts and minds that are quick to listen, slow to speak, and words that are meant to direct people toward him. Honoring someone is doing whatever you can to help them better see and run toward their Savior, Jesus Christ. Whatever that is, do that.

While we honor everyone, the church and our God have a special place in our lives and in our hearts. Our devotion to them is higher than our devotion to any one person or any ruler or government. Peter's actually done a pretty scandalous thing here -- he's made the emperor the equivalent of "everyone" when compared to the God of all Creation and His most treasured possession, the church.

Your love for your fellow believers must strong and unwavering. If we can't get love for one another right within our church, we're going to have a really hard time getting it right in the world. So master it here. Love one another well. And always continue to develop a deep, abiding, passionate love for God. Let that flame become a fire. Fear not government, no ruler, no human being. Fear, love, and respect God above all else.

To wrap up, **I want to address three questions you're probably still thinking**. The answers I offer for these questions are going to apply, for the most part, to our own American context. How we interact with difficult or failing governments here looks quite different than how Christians should respond to issues in other places around the world.

**1. What do I do when I feel like the government has failed its appointed task to punish evil and uphold good?**

- a. Take some time to process what's going on in prayer, and with other believers.
  - i. It is okay to be disappointed when governments fail. What's not okay is to internalize that disappointment and let it fester in your heart, allowing things like bitterness, hatred, and rage to consume your thoughts and feelings.
  - ii. There's a lot of Scripture you could read and pray through to help you get a biblical perspective on how to move forward. The entire book of Amos is about a guy who was called by God to walk into the court of the king and call him and the leaders of Israel out for immorality. Reflect on Psalm 75, Proverbs 8, or Daniel 2:21.
  - iii. Don't try to do all this alone. It's really easy to justify your own anger, and really easy to stay bitter in your own head and heart. Share the burden with others.
- b. Remain committed to the good you were created to do.
  - i. Part of why we do good works is to model what goodness is to a fallen world. God has things he wants you to do so other can see it and have their hearts turned toward morality and truth.
  - ii. *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10 ESV)*
  - iii. Don't let a failing government stop you loving others well. Nothing would make Satan happier than to so muddle up a government that it causes Christians so much despair that we just quit. Don't quit doing good. God made you to do them.
- c. If you feel you are able or called to do something...then humbly pursue doing it.
  - i. Tell your government what you feel they are doing wrong. Actively support good candidates. Talk to your legislatures. God advocate for what you believe is right.
  - ii. The Bible has A WHOLE LOT of people who saw the injustice and took it head on. God's very much all for being passionate and fighting for what is right. That fight has to be one of humility, respect, and nonviolence, but you can absolutely stand up for what is right and please God. If you feel called to do so, by all means please do so. You might just help a government better punish what is evil and uphold what is good.

**2. What do I do when I feel like I cannot respect my ruler?**

- a. Two suggestions here: (1) Respect the office or the position itself as something God created to help bring order to our society. (2) Respect that the person bears the image of God, just like you, and is someone God loves.
- b. I don't think these solve the problem, but I also don't know that the problem is going to completely resolved in this era of redemptive history. You and I were made to be ruled by God. There is always going to be a sense of dissatisfaction while being ruled by a human being. Our hearts long for the Kingdom of God and it's King. Presidents and Governors are a dim reflection of what we truly desire.
- c. Nevertheless, as followers of Christ we are instructed to respect the men and women that serve as our leaders. If you find them unworthy of respect, don't let your evaluation drag you down into cheap, careless, and insolent cynicism.
- d. Give the position the honor it is due. Pray for the character, decisions, and salvation of all leaders, including those you find flaws in.

**3. What do I do when I feel like I cannot do what the law/ruler/government demands of me?**

- a. First, you have to determine if being obedient would cause you to sin or prevent you from sharing the Gospel.



- i. If yes, then measured and careful civil disobedience might be required. Scripture does allow for the practice of civil disobedience.
  - 1. The Hebrew midwives lied to Pharaoh when he commanded them to murder the newborn sons of Israel, telling him they always arrived too late to carry out the execution (Exodus 1:15-17).
  - 2. Rahab hid the spies of Israel and is later celebrated as a hero in Hebrews 11.
  - 3. Christians of the early church tried their best to comply with Roman law, but when it came to the orders to cease preaching the Gospel they refused.
  - 4. The important thing to remember is the disobedience must be civil. We do not advance the Kingdom of God through violence or hatred.
- ii. If the law or government is not causing you to sin or preventing you from sharing the Gospel, but does make you uncomfortable...then it might be best for you to simply live peaceably with that discomfort.
  - 1. An example of this would be taxes. Jesus had no problem paying taxes, though some of those taxes no doubt went toward things he really would rather not have been paying for.
  - 2. This is a sacrifice we can make. This is something we can endure. It allows us to remain active and obedient citizens, which allows us to do some of the good things we've already talked about today.

**As followers of Christ we are commanded to willingly submit to all civil authorities because by doing so we participate in one part of God's plan to love and redeem the world.** It's a plan I want to be a part of, and I hope and pray you do as well. Our submission is for the good of others and the glory of God.

#### **For the Benediction:**

Psalm 146 | Put Not Your Trust in Princes

[1] Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

[2] I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

[3] Put not your trust in princes,

in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

[4] When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;

on that very day his plans perish.

[5] Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD his God,

[6] who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them,

who keeps faith forever;

[7] who executes justice for the oppressed,

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;  
[8] the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.  
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the LORD loves the righteous.  
[9] The LORD watches over the sojourners;  
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

[10] The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, to all generations.  
Praise the LORD!