

## Hope When Life is Hard...



A VERSE BY VERSE  
EXPOSITION OF  
THE EPISTLE OF  
FIRST PETER

### When Every Country is the Land of the Free 1 Peter 2:13-17 (695)

Martha Stewart is going to spend five months in the slammer for lying to the government. Our government has determined that it is in the public interest to wage war in Iraq. Our government continues to defend abortion and has arrogantly presumed to redefine marriage. I set aside 25% of every paycheck to satisfy various tax obligations imposed by the government. We live in a place and in a time when the tentacles of government make their way into every crack and crevice of our lives. What should be our attitude toward such civil authority? How is a Christian to behave in a culture that is becoming increasingly hostile toward them and their values? Our passage this morning speaks to such issues.

**1 Peter 2:13-17**, *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,<sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.<sup>15</sup> For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.<sup>16</sup> Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.<sup>17</sup> Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Here's how one commentator describes the historical situation behind 1 Peter 2:13-17. "The situation was one of sporadic hostility to Christians, exhibited more by social pressure than by official policy, and these verses are a response to that situation" (Achteimer, 1 Peter, p. 179). Here is the point I think Peter is making in these verses: Christians are free to serve God in every culture and under any circumstance.

In **verse 12** Peter urges us to *keep our behavior excellent among the Gentiles*. Last Sunday I argued that this means to live exemplary lives for the glory of God in the culture in which we find ourselves. God has called us to live beautiful, attractive, winsome lives before all men that the gospel might be commended to them. We should understand verses 13-17 as an example of how Christians are to live out the exhortation to exemplary living in verses 11-12.

Now, in 1 Peter the Christian virtue of humility, expressed in a spirit of submission, is essential to this exemplary life. There can be no beauty, no winsomeness to the life without a submissive spirit. God's call to humility is communicated to us in verses such as **Ephesians 5:21**, *be subject to one another in the fear of Christ*. In **5:5-6a** Peter himself says, *all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God* (see Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:3-8). **1 Peter 3:8**, *to sum up, let all be ... humble in spirit*. Christians are those who live humbly before God and men.

In general, as fallen sons of Adam, we have an inherent distaste for submission. We do not like being placed, much less placing ourselves, in a position where we might be taken advantage of; in a position where we are not in control; in a

position that appears to be one of weakness; in a position where we cannot exercise our rights (see **1 Cor. 9:4-6, 11-12**). Every fallen fiber in us rebels at such a thought. And the result of this resistance to submission, of course, is rebellious, ungodly children; angry, contentious marriages; selfish, unruly citizens; lazy, irresponsible employees; and critical, divisive church members. All the same, a general spirit of subordination is to mark the Christian.

Peter says that submission is to mark every relationship. In our passage for today, for example, he speaks of our submission to the civil authority – the individuals and the various agencies that are in authority over us. In **2:18** he speaks of the submission of Christian servants to their masters. *Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect.* We often apply this principle to the relationship of Christian employees to their employers. In **3:1** Peter addresses the idea of submission in the home. We know from Ephesians that mutual submission is called for in the home. Peter agrees (**3:7**) but here the emphasis is on the role of the wife. *In the same way, you wives be submissive to your own husbands* (see also **3:5**). In **5:5** he speaks to the matter of submission in the church. *You younger men, be subject to your elders.* Back in **3:8** he summarizes our relationships in general. *To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit.*

So as Christians we are called to exemplary living in this world – in every sphere of our existence, with every individual, at all times, and in every circumstance. The Christian virtue of humility expressed in a spirit of submission is essential to this exemplary life. And so this morning we look at this call of God for His people to live in submission within the culture at large. As we do so please keep

in mind the big idea - Christians are free to serve God in every culture and under any circumstance.

*Submit yourselves ... to every human institution.* The meaning of the word “submit” is closer to *subordinate* than to *obey* although the later is certainly present. The word “submit” simply means to place yourself under; to willingly take your proper place in a particular sphere as divinely arranged and assigned by God.

There are eleven players on a football team. Each man is assigned a particular position to play – center, guard, tackle, quarterback, and so forth. For the team to function properly and to enjoy a measure of success each player must fulfill his role as assigned. I saw a PBS special on the B-17 bomber last week. B-17s were flown by a crew of ten men – nose gunner, pilot, co-pilot, navigator, radioman, and so forth. For the crew to have the best chance for a successful mission and safe return home each of those ten men had to willingly fulfill his role as assigned. To submit is to take your place as God as assigned it in the various spheres of life – in the society, in the church, and in the home.

Peter’s specific interest in 13-17 is our submission to *every human institution*. He qualifies what he means in verse 14. He explains, *whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him* [the king]. We are to place ourselves under the authority of the governing individuals or bodies of the society in which we live. According to Peter an essential component of an exemplary life is how we behave as citizens.

There are a few fundamental principles we need to keep in mind as we consider our role in society. First of all, a Christian is not ultimately, primarily a citizen of any particular country. This is necessarily the case because our God is the God of *every tribe and tongue and people and nation* (**Rev. 5:9**). We have been constituted *a kingdom to our God* (**Rev. 5:10**). **Philippians 3:20** says, *for our citizenship is in heaven*. Peter has just taught us that we are a *HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD'S OWN POSSESSION* (**2:9**). **Ephesians 2:19** tells us that, as part of this holy nation, *we are fellow citizens with the saints*. I still get goose bumps whenever I hear Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" or Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever." I would be the first to confess that God has "shed His grace" on us as a people. However, my primary allegiance is to that eternal kingdom of which Jesus Christ is both King and Head (see **Ps. 10:16, 29:10b**).

Second, civil authority is from God (**Rom. 13:1**). God has ordained the existence of governments for the happiness and welfare of men. He has instituted human government to check human depravity. A. A. Hodge well says, "Some have supposed that the right or legitimate authority of human government has its foundation ultimately in 'the consent of the governed,' 'the will of the majority,' or in some imaginary 'social compact' entered into by the forefathers of the race at the origin of social life" (*Commentary on the Confession of Faith*, p. 239). "But the Scripture teaches us that civil government comes from God, and that it has authority by the will of God with or without the consent of the governed" (Williamson, p. 241).

This leads to the third principle. A Christian's ultimate authority is God not man or any human institution (**Acts 4:19**). This is the case because the authority possessed by human institutions is a *derived* authority. It is granted by God.

Pilate said to Jesus, *“Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?”* Do you remember Jesus’ response? *“You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above”* (**John 19:10-11**).

Fourth, “no particular form of civil government is designated in Scripture” (Williamson, p. 241). This means that Christians are “not at liberty to render or to withhold obedience depending upon the type of government that exists” (p. 241). Well, I’ll obey if the government is “of the people by the people and for the people” (*Gettysburg Address*) but I’ll not submit to any king. We must remember that in the days of Peter and Paul the totalitarian government of Rome ruled the world. If the emperor said, “Throw the Christians to the lions,” then to the lions the saints were thrown. Period. But it appears that both Paul and Peter considered that Rome, on the whole, was fulfilling the role of legitimate government.

Fifth, civil authority is not unlimited. Indeed, “all divinely-constituted authority in human affairs is limited by [the Word of God]. The civil magistrate is ordained of God as minister or servant of God for good. His task is to bear the sword of physical power as a terror to evil works. His task is that of revenger to execute wrath upon [those who do] evil. As long as a civil government is content to restrain and to punish crime and violence, protecting the good and punishing the evil, the Christian must support, pray for, and honor that government. But when that government punishes the righteous, and rewards the evil, becoming militaristic and bent upon aggression, it is the duty of Christians to resist that power because it subverts the ordinance of God” (Williamson, p. 241).

Submit yourselves to the civil authority (see **Titus 3:1**). OK. But put some meat on those bones for me. Give me some idea in practical terms of what this means. We see two things in I Timothy 2:1-2. *I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority ... in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.* The **first** thing we see is that we are to pray for those in authority over us. Now this is plain enough. The **second** thing we see is that we are to live quietly and peaceably with other citizens. **Third**, to submit means to respect the office of the one in authority. **1 Peter 2:17**, *honor the king.* **Fourth**, it means to pay taxes and fees as required. **Romans 13:6a, 7**, *because of this you also pay taxes ... render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due.* Of course, Jesus clearly taught the same principle. In **Matthew 22** He was asked if it was lawful to pay a particular tax to Caesar. In response Jesus took a coin with Caesar's image and inscription on it and said, *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's"* (17-21). **Fifth**, to submit means to obey their lawful commands. This would include civil ordinances, building and other codes, traffic laws, tax laws, and so on. We may not like them. We may consider them unreasonable or just plain crazy. We may chafe under them. But if not contrary to the Word of God then we are bound to obey them. **Sixth**, submission means to know and work within the rights and privileges that are yours under the civil authority. Under our particular constitution these are many. In **Acts 15:11** when Paul said, *"I appeal to Caesar"* he was taking advantage of a legal right he knew he had. After the authorities in Philippi had beaten the stuffing out of Paul and Silas, they planned to release them under cover. In **Acts 16:37** Paul objected, *"They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out."* *And the policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates.*

*And they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans.* You see they had violated Paul's rights as a citizen of Rome. **Seventh**, to submit means to support the civil authority in every righteous endeavor. To the extent that the civil government overall seeks to *punish evildoers and praise those who do right (1 Peter 2:14)* we should support it with a measure of enthusiasm and gratitude to God. **Eighth**, submission means to engage in good deeds as a general rule of life to the benefit of all men. **Galatians 6:10**, *so then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men.* The broad contours of our civic responsibilities are not that tough to figure out.

As you might expect these verses raise a number of questions. What about redress of grievances? What about participation in the public debate or holding public office? What about war? What about civil disobedience? We are dealing with the text as it lies before us and Peter simply does not speak to these matters. His interest is not in the detailed mechanics of civil obedience as much as it is in the grand motivation for such obedience. Our motivation is rooted in our relationship to God. Indeed, this passage is theocentric to the core. God's name is mentioned four times. Careful consideration of these citations elevates the passage far above a mere lesson in civics or political science. Let's look at three phrases.

The first is in **2:13**. *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake (or because of the Lord).* Now, if we do something for the sake of our children we do it to *their* profit. We do it with *their* interests as our primary consideration. For example, a father may work a second job for awhile in order to help his daughter pay her college expenses. Our primary consideration in submission is not how it might benefit us or even the nation. Our primary consideration is the pleasure, the delight that

God will take in our obedient submission. This is what fueled every action of our Lord. Speaking of His obedience to the Father Jesus said in **John 8:29**, “*I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.*” Our submission to all men is but one expression of our submission to God. We place ourselves under the civil authority *because of the Lord* – because we acknowledge *His* wisdom in establishing human government, because we honor *His* image in our fellow-men, because we respect *His* providential ordering of our lives, but especially because we are grateful for His infinite mercies to us in Jesus Christ (see Clowney, *1 Peter*, p. 105). Submit yourselves ... for the Lord’s sake.

The second phrase is in **2:15**, *for such is the will of God*. We can have the joy of knowing that our obedience in this regard serves the good and wise and eternal purposes of God. You see God actually accomplishes His good pleasure through the obedience of His people. We will see this in a very tangible, specific way in **3:1**, for example, where an unbelieving husband comes to faith through the witness of the submissive, chaste, and respectful behavior in the will of God of his wife. In the case of this passage, “Christians were often charged with subversion of the established order. They were accused of spreading disloyalty against the government, of disrupting trade, and of all manner of shocking practices, including cannibalism and incest. By their law-abiding conduct they could give the lie to such wild and ignorant accusations” (Clowney, p. 110).

The third phrase is in **2:16**. We submit from our position in Christ – we are free men and women and we are called to *act as free men*. **John 8:36**, “*If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.*” Christians are free to be servants of God (*bondslaves*) and to all men. How is such a thing so? You see unredeemed men are enslaved by self-interest. Consequently they cannot forgo

their rights, privileges, advantages, position, pride, possessions, and dignity for the sake of a higher interest than themselves.

Christians are free! We are free to serve God and men without fear of loss. We have no **status** to lose. Our status as a joint-heir with Christ is already assured. We have no **rights** to lose. We belong to God, bought with the precious blood of Christ. We have no **life** to lose. *We have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20). We have died and our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).* We have no **treasure** to lose. Our treasure is laid up in heaven where Christ is (Matt. 6:20). Our inheritance is *reserved in heaven for us (1:4).* We have no **dignity** to lose. Our dignity is in Christ so we are free to bear insult, injury, and shame knowing that *our faith will result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:7).* Beloved, we are free from that which could ruin us for eternity – the guilt of our sin. We are free from the law as a means of obtaining a right standing before God. We have been granted a righteousness from God. All of this as a result of what Christ has done for us by His sufferings and death in the place of sinners. Yes, you are free! You are free to take up your cross and follow Christ. Christians are free to serve God and all men in every culture and under any circumstance.

**Benediction** ... Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen (**Eph. 3:20-21**).