

# Subject for the Lord's Sake

1 Peter: Hope Away from Home

1 Peter 2:11-25

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Our text this morning presents an ethical dilemma all of you have experienced to one degree or another. I read a sermon this week that illustrated it well.<sup>1</sup> Imagine for a moment two kids, a brother and a sister. They're generally well behaved. And they know it's wrong to hit. But one day you see the brother hit his sister. You say, "Don't you know it's wrong to hit your sister?" To which he replies, "Yes, but she called me a booger face."

Have you ever experienced something like this? You do something you know is wrong, but you justify it because the other person did something wrong first. Now you may be thinking, how's that an ethical dilemma? Well let me bring it a little closer to home.

In the next few weeks some of you may face this dilemma when it comes time to file your taxes. You know it's wrong to cheat on your taxes, but you also know the government may spend your money on something you believe is immoral. So, you decide it's okay to fudge just a bit. Maybe you could give some of that extra money to the building project! Or what about the workplace? You know it's wrong to gossip behind your supervisor's back. But somebody has to expose how his incompetence is about to lead the company over a cliff.

In our text this morning, we encounter two commands that are hard for us to wrap our head around. We're called to submit to the government (vv. 13-14). And slaves are called to submit to their masters (v. 18). But here's the thing. We know the government in Peter's day was not a paragon of virtue! The emperor may well have been Nero.<sup>2</sup> You know, the child abuser. The one who eventually had Peter crucified. And what about the slave masters in question? We're told explicitly some are unjust. The churches Peter was writing to knew this. Maybe they were thinking, can you give me one good reason to submit to these crooked authorities?

Maybe you're thinking the same thing. We too live in a society where it's hard to trust government at times. And sometimes we're placed under the authority of people who aren't the most upstanding citizens.

We know it's right to submit to authority, generally speaking. But do we really have to submit to bad or dishonest or incompetent people? When we come to commands like these, we may say, "Give me one good reason to submit!"

Remember who's writing these commands. It's none other than Simon Peter. And he didn't always have this attitude toward authority. Remember when the authorities came to arrest Jesus on the Mount of Olives? How did Peter respond? Did he submit to the governing authorities? No, he drew his sword! He cut off the ear of Malchus (Jn. 18:10).

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<sup>1</sup> Darryl Dash, [One Good Reason](#)

<sup>2</sup> Helm; contra Jobes

David R. Helm. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings*, Preaching the Word; Karen H. Jobes. *1 Peter*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

But since then, he's had a change of heart. What was his one good reason for calling the church to submit to the governing authorities and to slave masters? Well he actually gives us three reasons. But the final one is the one really good reason. So, to divide our time this morning, I'm going to cover the three reasons Peter gives us for submitting to the authorities in our society.

## SO UNBELIEVERS MIGHT BECOME BELIEVERS (11-12)

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The first reason comes out in verses 11-12.

### 1 Peter 2:11-12<sup>3</sup>

*<sup>11</sup>Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup>Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*

So far in our series on 1 Peter, we've seen our call to live holy lives as exiles. Last week we saw how to live in our relationships with others in the church. This week we learn how to live in relationship with others in society.

Peter gives a negative command and a positive command here. We're to abstain from the passions of the flesh. That is, we should abstain from bad living. And we should pursue good living. Those in the church should keep their conduct honorable among those outside of the church.

And what's the reason for living good lives among the unbelievers? It's so unbelievers might become believers. The overarching reason we should submit to government and to unjust authority is evangelistic in purpose. I think that's what's meant in verse 12, when Peter says, "so that...they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." The day of visitation is the day when Christ returns to judge the earth. And as we see in Revelation, on that day there will be believers who glorify God (Rev. 11:13) and unbelievers who don't repent and don't glorify God (Rev. 16:9).<sup>4</sup>

Peter wants the people who are currently speaking evil against Christians to one day glorify God. He wants the Christianity they're now mocking to one day be the thing they embrace and give glory to God for! And how will this transformation take place? They'll see the conduct of believers. They'll see lives that reflect the grace of the gospel. And may lead some to faith in Christ!

Now this is not to say that people can become Christians simply through our deeds. We know that no one comes to faith simply by watching us. The only people who are born again are those who hear the gospel, repent, and believe. But our lives can lead people to Christ. How does that happen? Our lives may make people stand up and wonder what's different about us. It may then lead them to ask questions. And that will give an opportunity for believers to share the gospel.

This was actually the main way people came to faith in the early church. In Alan Kreider's book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, he asks why the church experienced so much growth during the first three centuries, before Christianity became the official religion. And what he found is remarkable. The church's growth wasn't organized. The church didn't have any type of missions program. In fact, to our knowledge, there were no books on evangelism written during this time.

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<sup>3</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner. *1, 2 Peter, Jude*. The New American Commentary

Instead, there were a number of books written on how to patiently endure the hostility of the society with godly living.<sup>5</sup>

In the second century, Justin Martyr wrote a letter to the emperor where he explained why the church was growing so rapidly. He said it was because the lives of ordinary Christians embodied the commands of Christ. And, he said, “good hope attracts.” You see, when Christians have hope they can endure suffering. Justin said the integrity of their witness depends upon an integrity of lifestyle. “We do turn the other cheek. We don’t retaliate. We’re not angry. And this causes people to wonder at the God who motivates Christians’ behavior.”<sup>6</sup>

So we live godly lives, so unbelievers may become believers. That’s the first reason to submit. Let’s look now at the second in verses 13-17.

## IT’S THE WILL OF GOD (13-17)

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### 1 Peter 2:13-17

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

The second reason we’re called to submit is because it’s the will of God. God set up government to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. Even evil governments, like the early Roman Empire, are still ordained by God to promote justice. So, it’s God’s will that we obey the laws put in place in by the government.

Now obviously there are some limits to this. When a government calls us to disobey God, we have to obey God. Even Peter did this in Acts when the government told him to stop preaching the gospel (Acts 4:19; 5:29). But generally speaking, we need to live within the limits of the law.

Peter knew that some may want to say, “We are no longer citizens of any earthly kingdom; we’re citizens of heaven. We’re free. We have no lord but Jesus Christ.” And so, they may want to use that freedom to disobey the government. But Peter says that because we’re servants of God, we must obey God. And obeying God involves obeying the government he’s put in place. It’s true, we don’t answer to Caesar; we answer to God. But because we answer to God, we must submit to human institutions for the Lord’s sake.

In verse 17, Peter lays out an order for honor. We must honor everyone. That is we must see all people created in God’s image as valuable. But we’re called to love the brotherhood. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are a priority for us. And we’re to fear God. We answer to him alone. But with all that said, we are still called to honor the emperor. Each relationship in our lives needs to be according to God’s design. We’re to live in right relationship within the society that’s in place.

And when we do this, we will silence people who think we’re evil (v. 15). In the ancient world, many were suspicious of Christians. Suetonius, the Roman historian, said that Christians were

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 9-10

<sup>6</sup> Kreider, 15-16

mischievous. Tacitus described Christianity as a dangerous superstition and detested for evil practices.<sup>7</sup> Peter wanted their good conduct in society to silence these erroneous views.

Many people in our society today don't think very highly of evangelical Christians. They associate us with the things we're against politically. They think we're bigots. They think our beliefs are evil. How should we respond in light of our text?

I don't think there are easy answers. And I'm certainly no expert on political engagement. But I wonder if our reputation isn't somewhat deserved. I'm certainly not saying that we shouldn't be active in the public square or that we shouldn't speak out against injustices and immorality in our society. And I believe full well that no matter how we conduct ourselves, there will always be those who hate us and will hate our God. But does the way we talk in the public square give due honor to all people? Do we publicly honor the government? Is our conduct such that it could silence unbelievers' views of us?

I think we should examine ourselves with these questions.

At a minimum, we have to uphold the laws in this country. For our submission to government is one way that we conduct ourselves honorably in this world. And it is the will of God.

Let's look now at the third reason we're called to submit to authorities. This comes out in verses 18-25.

### **CHRIST'S EXAMPLE (18-25)**

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Before I get to the reason, I want to say something about the command in verse 18: "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust."

Slaves are called to submit to their masters, even rotten ones. This is a hard one for me. At face value, it doesn't make sense. Why would we just lay down in the face of injustice? When we see atrocities like slavery, shouldn't we stand up?

In the face of slavery, don't we want to highlight people like William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King Jr.? Do we really want to promote a doormat mentality and continue to propagate abuse?

Brandon Redic helped me with this one. He says this passage isn't prohibiting Christians from fighting institutional injustice in society. This passage is telling individuals how to live when they are living under ungodly masters or supervisors.

I was also reminded that the slavery mentioned in 1 Peter isn't the same kind of slavery African Americans faced in this country. It isn't an involuntary, racialized slavery. It's more like an indentured servant. People who were among the servant class often sold themselves into slavery for economic reasons.

The closest thing we have to this today is a person who joins the military so the government will pay for their college. And so, the military owns that person for five years. In that situation, a Christian should obey even if their superior is a crooked tyrant.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jobes

<sup>8</sup> Helm

They may suffer under that master. But their suffering shouldn't be because they're being punished for doing wrong. They should suffer for doing good. And if they suffer for doing good, it's a gracious thing (vv. 19-20). Or literally, it's a grace.

But why does Peter say it's a grace when we suffer under ungodly leadership, when we're doing the right thing? Why is submission and suffering something Christians are called to? It's here that we come to Peter's one really good reason. It's to follow Christ's example. This comes out in verses 21-25.

### **1 Peter 2:21-25**

*<sup>21</sup>For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup>He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

The really good reason we're called to be subject to rulers and masters is to follow Christ's example (v. 21).

Christ also suffered. He suffered under unjust government. And he suffered even though he didn't do anything wrong. His death was the ultimate injustice because he was the only man who never sinned (v. 22). He didn't retaliate or seek revenge. Instead he trusted God—that God would deal with the unjust authorities in time (v. 23).

And because the sinless Savior died, sinners like you and me are set free from our sin. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...by his wounds we're healed from our sins (v. 24).

Do you see? Jesus suffered unjustly. He paid the price our sins deserved. And because of that suffering, believers are saved. His suffering and death on the cross serve as a substitutionary sacrifice.

But that's not all. His death is also an example for us of how to live. He not only died for our sin. Through his death, we have died to sin. And we're to live for righteousness.

In other words, we don't have to retaliate when things in this world are wrong. We too can entrust all things to God. He's now our master. The overseer of our souls. That perspective should enable us to submit and suffer. And as we do so, that might lead other people to salvation.

This is one really good reason to do what seems so counter-cultural to us, so counter-intuitive. The gospel is counter-intuitive. It makes no human sense. But it is God's way of saving sinners like you and me!