

# Fear God, Honor the Emperor

## 1 Peter 2:13-17

### Introduction

- Peter just urged Christians to LIVE HONORABLY among the unbelieving world around us (v. 12), in such a way that our GOOD DEEDS would be plainly visible, and might lead to the GLORY OF GOD.
- Now, he's going to spell out what this honorable conduct will look like in real life: SUBMISSION. (recurring theme in remainder of letter)
  - o Christians to government (2:13-17)
  - o Servants to masters (2:18-23)
  - o Wives to husbands (3:1-6)
  - o Spiritual powers to Christ (3:22)
  - o Church to elders (5:5)
- Humans are rebels at heart; Adam & Eve rebelled against God's authority in the garden, and every human since then has an allergy to authority, and a strong inclination toward independence and self-rule.
  - o When God saved us, he overcame our rebellious wills and opened our eyes to the beauty of Christ and the goodness of the gospel, and birthed in our hearts a new taste for his wise & loving commands. In a real sense, that's what salvation IS! So...
- Willing, humble submission of oneself to those whom God has placed in authority over us is one of the hallmarks of Christian faithfulness.

### READ 2:13-17

**BIG IDEA:**           **Christians give honor to Jesus Christ  
by submitting to government authority.**

### Be subject... to every human institution (v. 13)

- o As "a holy nation" (v. 9), "God's people" (v. 10), and "sojourners & exiles" (v. 11), Christians might be inclined to think we have no allegiance to earthly institutions at all! Perhaps we should separate from the world entirely, and gather into our own Christian convents and sub-cultures!
  - o But Peter says "No – we are not to separate ourselves, or see ourselves as out from under the authority of human government." Rather, we should willingly place ourselves under that authority, gladly submitting to the boundaries and penalties of its laws. (And if you're wondering about the scope of that command, look at the next phrase:)
- Be subject... whether to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him
    - o We might say, in our context, both to federal govt AND to state/local govt
    - o In whatever particular national expression, the instruction seems pretty broad in its scope: Whatever the particular level of government or shape of its authority structure, *submit to it*.

- **APPLY:** In one way, this is all quite simple:
  - Honor the requirements and boundaries established by law. (work for a living, don't steal; follow traffic laws, don't purchase or sell illegal substances, etc.)
  - Seek to be faithful to particular civic duties & privileges: voting, holding public office, community service, jury duty, etc.
  - Particular interest during this season: Pay your taxes! You may be tempted to fudge a bit on your tax returns, in hopes of securing a better refund. Don't do it! Godly submission to the government would require honesty and integrity in the information you provide on your tax forms.
- These are all simple, straightforward ways that we can "be subject to the emperor."
  
- Purpose of government: to punish evil and to praise good (v. 14)
  - Cf. Rom. 13:4 – "He is God's servant for your good... an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."
  - Civil governments are a form of God's common grace to humankind, rewarding good and restraining evil in society.
  - Piper: *"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."*
  - IMPLICATION: *Morality is the foundation for civil law.* Civil government, by God's design, exists in order to enforce a moral code; to punish that which is evil, and to praise that which is good.
    - A particular challenge emerges when what is called GOOD and what is called EVIL begin to be reversed. When human institutions call GOOD what God's Word calls EVIL, and begin to enforce that inverted morality, God's people have a full-fledge dilemma on their hands.
    - Slavery; Jim Crow laws; In our own day, abortion; same-sex marriage; assisted suicide; threats to religious liberty
    - Can't say much about HOW exactly to engage on these matters. However, to the extent that the state violates God's clear commands, there is a time for "civil disobedience." Think of Peter & James in Acts 4:19, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge..."
  
- **TRANSITION:** All of this raises the question: "Why should we be submissive to government? Because we have compliant personalities? Because we're afraid of being punished? Another question: What is it about this passage that colors how CHRISTIANS specifically are to relate to human government? Is our relationship to government supposed to be any different whatsoever from that of every other citizen? The answer to these questions is in a four-word phrase in v. 13 that I've left out so far:

Be subject **FOR THE LORD'S SAKE** to every human institution

- For the emperor's sake? No. For the glory of Rome? No. For the sake of the Lord, that is of Jesus Christ.
  - o "For the Lord's sake" means that our obedience is to be motivated by our love for Christ, and by our desire to see him honored and praised. You don't have to be a "patriot" to be a good citizen, if the honor of Jesus Christ is the fuel for your submission.
- By calling it a "human institution, Peter reminds us that earthly nations and societies are temporal and subservient. God's kingdom is eternal and ultimate, while even the strongest/wealthiest human societies are fleeting and fallible.
- "For the Lord's sake" means that our allegiance to an earthly nation is to be, at best, secondary to our allegiance to Christ's Kingdom.
  - o Phil. 3:20 – "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."
- **APPLY:** Our submission to governing authorities is FOR THE LORD'S SAKE. We need to be careful that our primary allegiance does not shift one inch from Christ, and onto any particular political party or figure. The moment we become entrenched in stubborn, blind support of a person or party, that is the moment our allegiance has shifted away from Christ. We are, in that entrenchment, submitting ourselves to the government for ITS OWN SAKE, instead of the Lord's. No political figure is beyond criticism or correction, and no party platform is beyond scrutiny.
  - o Let me go a step further: Since our submission to government should be "for the Lord's sake," any political alliance or commitment that damages Christian unity is out of step with the gospel. If you find it impossible to fellowship sincerely with Christians who hold different political positions, or who vote for different candidates, then you have elevated human government to a place of supremacy that only Christ should hold. Vote, hold positions, but for the sake of Christ & Church, not at their expense.

What is the God-ordained effect of Christians' honorable submission to governing authorities?

- v. 15 – "by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people;" referring again to the "Gentiles" who charge the Church with evil (v. 12). The call here is to demonstrate that these charges have no basis in reality, because it should be evident that Christians are living as honorable, law-abiding citizens.
- This is strategy on God's part! He wants us to obey our earthly governments out of love and reverence FOR CHRIST; but he intends to use our worshipful obedience as dutiful citizens to disarm the threats and accusations of the world against his Church!
- **APPLY:** Here, I think, is an implication for us: Since God's strategy, as it were, is for the world's slander of Christians to be silenced, Christian submission to the governing authorities should not merely be passive obedience but active good. Let's go beyond mere law-keeping. Let's focus on DOING GOOD, and good that is tangible and visible to the world:
  - o For the Lord's sake: love your neighbor, feed the poor, volunteer at the local family shelter, promote Kingdom-shaped charities and causes, speak honorably and compassionately about others

- Freedom vs. slavery (v. 16)
  - o Far from the “freedom” that Americans celebrate (total independence, autonomy, not accountable to anyone or anything)
  - o The freedom of the Christian is the ability (by God’s grace) to live by God’s commands. A bit of a paradox!
    - **ILLUSTRATE:** Dog trainers speak of the ultimate goal of “off-leash obedience.” That is, the training has advanced through basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, to the point that the dog can be trusted with the freedom of being disconnected from any leash or line. The trainer of that dog is confident that when he gives the dog a command (like COME, or HEEL, or STAY), the dog will quickly and freely obey. And that confidence allows the dog trainer to keep the dog free from any leash or line. In other words, the freest dog is the obedient dog.
    - Much the same way for Christians. The freedom provided us by Christ’s death & resurrection isn’t the freedom to “live as we please” or “express our true selves.” The freedom afforded us by Christ is the freedom to live under his good and loving authority! The more we grow in our obedience to him, the more of that freedom we experience.
- Piper: As Christians, we say to the governing authorities: “We are free in respect to you but slaves of God. We will submit not because you have power, but because our King commands it for the honor of his institution of civil government. Yet our submission is an honor to you because under God and from God you bear the authority to enforce the laws of the land.”

v. 17 – Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

### **Gospel Pivot**

- Christ provides the best example of this submission.
- In John 19, as the Roman governor Pilate questioning Jesus, and trying to determine his guilt or innocence, he scolds Jesus in v. 10, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?!”
- Jesus’s reply: “You would have no authority over me at all, unless it had been given you from above.”
- And so while Jesus could have spoken a word of self-defense and rescued himself from the torture and shame of the cross, instead he yielded to the authority of this Roman official, and went along with the plan of the crowd to crucify him. Why?
  - o Because the plan for his crucifixion was not ultimately the Jews’, but the Father’s plan.
  - o Because the authority of Pilate to deliver him to death was not ultimately his own, but God’s authority granted to him for carrying out his purposes.
- And so in submitting himself to the unjust Roman government, he went to the cross for sinners – and became our substitute; our sacrifice; so that in his death, we might live.