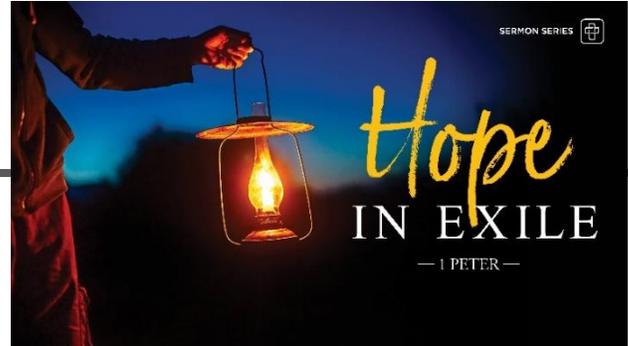


The Winsome Witness of Civil Disobedience

1 Peter 2:11-17

David Sunday June 7, 2020



When I chose to preach through 1 Peter a couple months ago, I could not have envisioned the turmoil our nation would be in this week. I could not have imagined a timelier text than the one we're going to read this morning. So let's read 1 Peter 2:11-17, praying as Samuel did, "Speak, Lord, for Your servants are listening." Hear the Word of God:

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul. ¹² Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.

¹³ Submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the emperor as the supreme authority ¹⁴ or to governors as those sent out by him to punish those who do what is evil and to praise those who do what is good. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that you silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. ¹⁶ Submit as free people, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but as God's slaves. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

This is God's Word.

To what extent do you identify with this statement? "Things just seem to be getting worse and worse, but there is no point in trying to change things, because the church is so small and ineffective."

I can imagine some of us feeling that way midway through 2020. This has been a year of contention and calamity. We've seen the coronavirus result in the deaths of more than 100,000 people. We've seen unemployment rise to rates as high as the Great Depression. We've seen the tragic and senseless deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Brianna Taylor and George Floyd. America is at a point of exasperation.

I thank God that we live in a country that protects in our constitution the right to peaceably assemble for protests. It's been moving to see many people expressing their grief at the ongoing racial injustice that still tears away at the fabric of our nation. I lament that the trust many faithful law enforcement officers have worked hard to build up in communities is now shattered by the egregious and evil actions of a few.

I've also been moved to see people like Sheriff Chris Swanson in Genesee County, Michigan, putting down his baton to listen to protesters, telling them he loves them and joining with them when they chanted, "Walk with us." It's been heartbreaking to see some of these peaceful protests get sabotaged by violent agitators who have destroyed property and businesses of innocent people.

What difference can we make in this sad state of turmoil? Well, listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying through the Apostle Peter to these Christians who are scattered abroad throughout Asia Minor as a minority of marginalized believers. He's saying to them, "Don't withdraw from the world. Don't isolate yourselves from your neighbors. Don't view yourselves as religious separatists on a sinking ship, just waiting for Jesus to come and rescue you. No, be fully engaged in your society, cultivating a reputation for good deeds. You are not to be of this world, but you are to live fully engaged in this world. You are to live like aliens and behave like ambassadors."

Look at the first words of 1 Peter 2:11: "*Dear friends,*" or "*Beloved, I urge you, as strangers and aliens...*" How does an alien live? He doesn't live like this is all there is. He doesn't aim for getting all his comfort and pleasure in this moment, because he or she knows, "I'm on a journey. I'm on a pilgrimage, so everything I'm doing now is a preparation for where I'm heading in the end, where there will be an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away, kept in heaven for me."

So live like an alien, but behave like an ambassador. Understand that God has positioned you where you are right now, with your relationships and every circumstance of your daily life, to represent Christ and His Kingdom. You are meant to stand out in society like a bright beacon of light shining in a dark place. This passage shows us how to do that. How will we stand out in our society as lights in the darkness? Let's look at three points.

1. We will stand out as lights in the darkness, not by pointing the finger at others, but by daily repentance and beautiful conduct.

First Peter 2:11-12 give us a strategy for how to live as God's people in this world—and it's very simple. Turn away from sin and cultivate beautiful conduct. Verse 11: *“Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from fleshly lusts that wage war against the soul.”*

We are soldiers in a great war and the conflict is not with other people. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but with an enemy who resides even within our own hearts. There are sinful desires—fleshly lusts—which are the natural desires human beings have, apart from the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit. They are not just guilty little pleasures; they are enemy combatants, waging war against our souls. We need to resist them, to fight against them, to abstain from these sinful desires.

This isn't just a verse for teenagers at a high school youth camp. It's not just referring to sexual desires. There are fleshly lusts waging war against the souls of 60-year-old women and 80-year-old men, just as much as there are fleshly lusts waging war against the souls of teenagers.

Peter describes some of these fleshly lusts in 1 Peter 2:1. These are things like malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander. We're going to be in this battle until the day Jesus calls us home. So if we want to shine as lights in this dark world, we have to cultivate the practice of daily repentance. It's like what Martin Luther said when he nailed those 95 theses to the door in Wittenberg. The first thesis was this: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

So when you watch the news or listen to podcasts, keep a close watch over your own heart. Be mindful of Jesus watching with you. How would He respond to what's happening in our nation? How would He treat the peaceful protesters? How would He comfort the hurting? What would Jesus say and do to address the racial inequity that still plagues our society? Is your heart in tune with Jesus?

As you scroll through your Twitter feed, remember there are sinful passions waging war against your soul. Those sinful passions, if they are not battled against, will arouse you to point the finger at other people—whether it's politicians or media personalities or rioters on the street. Those sinful passions can very easily inflame pride in your heart that starts to make you think, “I'm superior; they're the problem.”

But God's Word is telling you, and telling me, that our biggest problem is the enemy of sin within our own hearts. If we're not constantly examining our own hearts in the mirror of God's Word, we will get off course from the intended effect God wants our lives to have on this world, which is in verse 12—cultivate beautiful conduct. Look at what it says: *“Conduct*

yourself honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.”

Sometimes Christians are not going to be just seen as wrong or misguided or primitive in our beliefs. Sometimes we're going to be seen as evildoers. We're intolerant. We're standing against culture's progress and its evolution into greater enlightenment. They're going to say, "You're holding us back. You're on the wrong side of history. You're bigots. You're evil."

I think we're going to see this happening more and more in our society, and our responsibility in this position is clear. Don't be defensive. Don't be combative. Don't be meanspirited and angry. Instead, be beautiful. That's the nuance of that word "honorably." Conduct yourselves honorably. It's a word that's sometimes translated "beautifully." There is to be a beauty, an attractiveness, an admirable quality to our lives that makes us luminous. It makes us a bright and shining light in a dark world.

Peter hasn't forgotten what he learned from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "*You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:14,16). Peter is very concerned about showing us how to do that in society. He doesn't want us to get agitated by people who scorn us as evildoers. Instead, he wants us to overcome evil with good. He wants us to have such a winsome witness in this world—the winsome witness of obedience to Christ's command to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us and to pray for them—that they will observe our good works and glorify God on the day when He visits.

In the Bible, the day of God's visitation is a day of judgment for unbelievers and a day of salvation for those who believe. It's often those who believe who are the ones who are giving the glory to God. In other words, we should never react to people's scorn with an attitude that basically says, "Fine. You can just go on your merry way to hell." Instead, we should long for those who scorn us to join with us in experiencing the grace of God that's been lavished on us—the grace Peter has been describing throughout this letter—that has caused us to be chosen by God, ransomed by Christ's precious blood, born again through the living and abiding Word, called out of darkness into light, sanctified in the Spirit and converted to live new lives of obedience to Jesus that are growing more and more like Him.

As we drink from the pure milk of the Word, He wants us to be so winsome, so attractive, living so beautifully that those who hate us are transformed by the grace of God that's at work in us, then they will join us in glorifying God for His grace on the day when He comes again in glory.

I heard someone say, “If you don’t want people who are scorning you to go to heaven, then you’re probably not a Christian.” I think that’s true. So translate that to everything we’re seeing on the news these days. What we’re seeing should melt our hearts to pray for people, to pray for looters and thieves and agitators, to pray for those who are hurting and grieving and angry, to pray for police officers, government authorities and leaders.

I was so encouraged in our Zoom prayer time at noon on Friday to hear many of you doing just that beautifully. This is the strategy for shining as lights in this dark world, not pointing the finger at others, but turning away from sin and cultivating beautiful conduct.

Now Peter is going to apply that strategy in some very specific ways in the next several passages. This morning, he’s going to apply it to our attitude toward the governing authorities.

2. We will stand out as lights in the darkness not by lawlessness, but by submission to every governing authority.

We see this next point in verses 13 and 14. The content of the command is clear: submit to every human authority, whether to the President, legislature, courts, the governor of Illinois or the police.

What does it mean to submit? I appreciate the way Mike Bullmore describes this. He says it means “to recognize the authority of government and yield to the authority of government.” We recognize that government is necessary for the promoting of peace, maintaining of order and human flourishing in society. The only thing worse than bad government is no government when anarchy and chaos reign supreme.

Submission to the government is one of the ways God helps us fight sin in our own lives, because there are rebellious impulses that rise up in our hearts that make us want to drive 100 miles an hour down Randall Road. The government helps us restrain that sin by saying, “No, you may not do that. No, you may not shoot your shotgun in your backyard if you live in downtown St. Charles.” And even saying things like, “People cannot gather in large assemblies during a time of a global pandemic.”

All of these are ways the government helps maintain order, peace and human flourishing in society. God is saying to us through Peter, “Recognize that authority and yield to that authority.” That doesn’t mean you’re always going to like everything the government does and it doesn’t mean the authority of the government is absolute. We’re going to see that in a few moments.

We do need to understand that the person who was in charge of the Roman government when Peter was writing these words from Rome, around the year A.D. 63, was a man named Nero. He had been put into power by his mother, who had poisoned his adopted father. He had been the emperor, so then her son rose to power at the age of 17. Then in A.D. 55, Nero had his step-brother, Britannicus, killed and in A.D. 59 he had his mother executed. In A.D. 62 he had his first wife executed, then he later forced his wise advisor Seneca to commit suicide.

In July of A.D. 64, Nero set the city of Rome ablaze—or at least many thought he did it. During the fires, Nero took Christians, dipped them in oil and set them ablaze on torches to illuminate the city streets at night so he could have festivals and parties. For nine days the city burned and the aftermath of those fires, they blamed the Christians as scapegoats, because Nero wanted to rebuild the Roman society to be even greater than it was.

It was under this emperor Nero that the Apostle Peter was crucified upside down. So Peter is not being naïve or sentimental when he says, not once, but twice, “Honor the emperor.” He knew full well what a sick and evil man Nero was. Yet he still says, “Submit to every human authority—even to the emperor as the supreme authority.” Supreme, humanly speaking, because Peter knows there’s an infinitely more supreme Authority than Emperor Nero—who, by the way, in A.D. 68 ended up committing suicide himself at the young age of 31.

The motivation for this command is in verse 13 in the words “because of the Lord” or “submit in the Lord.” The Lord Jesus is the supreme Authority over every emperor, president, governor, mayor and police officer. It’s because of His supreme authority that we are to submit to the human authorities as an expression of our worship for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter understands there are going to be times when human government will command us to do something God forbids, as well as forbid us from doing something God commands. He himself experienced this in the book of Acts when he and John were told not to preach or teach any longer in the name of Jesus. Their response, after being thrown in prison, was, “We must obey God rather than man.”

If we are put in a position in which we have to disobey human authorities because of our allegiance to the Lord, it will make a huge difference in how we disobey—if we must disobey. We will not disobey by insulting, cursing or thumbing our nose at authority. We will not disobey by disrespecting the person created in God’s image.

This should cause us to ask, “How is my speech and my conduct toward those who are in authority reflecting upon my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? If I am Christ’s ambassadors, would Jesus be pleased with the way I’m conducting myself? If Jesus sent me to represent Him to J.B.

Pritzker or Nancy Pelosi or Donald Trump, how would I speak to them? If they read my social media history prior to my visit and saw the things I had said and written about them, would they think, ‘I want to get to know more about Jesus because the way this follower of Jesus speaks and acts?’”

This also raises the question of who is primarily discipling me in the way I think about politics and the way I think about government? I read a pastor who wrote these words and I think they’re wise. J. Medders says the Kingdom of God transcends American politics. I’m concerned that many Christians accidentally want American politics to inform Kingdom ethics. That’s not Christianity. I’m worried that some evangelical Christians have been more discipled in these cultural moments by Hannity, Shapiro, Cuomo and Matt Walsh than they have been discipled by Moses, Isaiah, Paul and our Jewish Lord of all.

Listen to the outlets of your choosing, but listen to the wisdom of God above all. If our daily routine involves watching hours of news with only two to ten minutes in the Word of God, we will not learn how to think, feel and act in the way of Jesus’ wise words.

We will stand out as light in the darkness of our society, not by lawlessness or disrespect, but by submission to every lawful authority.

3. We will stand out as lights in the darkness, not by blind allegiance, but by the winsome witness of active love.

As we look at this text, we need to understand that Peter is not calling for blind allegiance to ruling powers. He’s not saying, “Just blend in. Don’t rock the boat. Don’t make waves. Just go along with whatever they tell you and save your own skin.” That was the trap many German Christians fell into during the Nazi regime.

Peter makes it clear that’s not what he’s saying. In verse 16, he instructs us to “*submit as free people.*” The Lord has freed us from the bondage to sin and fear. Our submission to authority is a reflection of the freedom we have in Christ and it should not be slavish submission. We are also not to use our freedom as a cover-up for evil. In other words, we can’t say, “I’m free in Christ, therefore I don’t have to obey the law.” Nor can we say, “I’m free in Christ, therefore I’m just going to go along with whatever the government says, even if it’s violating the law of God.” The reason we are to take this stance is because we are God’s slaves, as we see in verse 16. That allegiance, that slavery to God, should transform everything in terms of our relationship to human authority.

Now, the heart of all this exhortation is that God's people are to be known in the world for our good works. The Holy Spirit is saying to us through Peter, "Let your reputation be as an activator of good works, not as an agitator of rebellion." Here's why. Verse 15: "*For it is God's will that you silence the ignorance of foolish people...*"—how?—"by doing good." In other words, when they accuse the Christians of trying to overthrow the Roman Empire, their accusations cannot stand because of all the things Christians are doing to help their neighbors. They're caring for the sick and the dying. They're rescuing babies who've been abandoned on the streets. They're giving to the poor. They are always working for the flourishing of society.

To the church in America today, verse 15 is saying live in such a way that when they say Christians are against women, they can see from your conduct how women are treated with dignity, protected from oppression and honored as fellow heirs of the grace of life.

Live in such a way that when they say Christians hate gay people, they can see from your conduct how kind you are and how you don't insult or ridicule. They should see how you treat those who are gay as human beings made in God's image—just like you—and that you see them just as much in need of the grace of God and salvation as you are.

Live in such a way that when they say Christians don't care about the poor, they can see from your generosity and from how you don't show favoritism toward those who are rich that you are the truest friend to the poor.

And live in this cultural moment in such a way that when they say Christians don't think black lives matter, they can see from your conduct and behavior that you love, listen to and honor people from every race and every background. I realize I just used a pretty loaded phrase because the movement known as "Black Lives Matter" has anti-Christian elements to it. I'm not advocating we get on board with the movement here. I'm talking about something else.

One of the things that stood out to me in the tributes to Ravi Zacharias when he died was that he told people he always tried to answer the questioner, not just the question. If you were talking to an African-American friend or neighbor who asked you, "In these times, do you believe that black lives matter?" I would hope you would answer the questioner, not just the question. I hope that you would want to listen and understand what's behind the question, because there's a long history that stretches right into the present that suggests that black lives have not mattered to us as they matter to God. Just as I hope we would not hesitate to say, "Unborn lives matter," I also hope our lives and conduct would show to a watching world that we believe black lives matter.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 135, asks, “What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?” which is “You shall not murder.” Here is the response:

The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away of the life of any.

That means that part of doing good works in this world means we care about things like the Flint water crisis, mass incarceration, disparities in housing, health care and education, like our elder Mike Jacoby has worked on in the state of Illinois. And yes, we care about police brutality. The catechism says I need to resist all thoughts that could lead to the unjust taking away of life.

Mike Edmonson, a brother in Christ who’s a pastor of an orthodox Presbyterian church in Grand Rapids, says we should ask questions like this:

Am I buying into the sinful belief that black folks are more inherently criminal than other people? When I hear about unarmed black people being killed, is my knee-jerk reaction that they somehow deserve whatever terrible thing happened to them? Am I cold and hardened to black suffering?

Dr. Edmonson describes a bit of his own experience in our culture. Just listen to how he expresses it:

My wife has to beg me, a grown 37-year-old man, not to go out to Walmart at night. Not because she’s afraid of the criminal element, but because she’s afraid of the police element and knows that when the police see me, they aren’t going to see Mike Edmonson, pastor of New City Fellowship Presbyterian Church. When they see me, they’re not going to see Mike Edmonson, Ph.D. in systematic theology. When they see me, all they’re going to see is a black man out late at night. She knows we’re getting stopped at ten times the rate of everybody else, arrested at 26 times the rate of everybody else and killed at five times the rate of everybody else.

I read those words, not as a slam against law enforcement; I’ve already said how so many faithful police officers put their lives on the line every day to protect and preserve peace in our society. We should be grateful for that, but we should also listen to this perspective of a brother

and sister in Christ. When I hear a brother in Christ speaking with such conviction and passion, I feel I need to lean in and listen more. I need to go deeper into what we said in our prayer of confession this morning:

We lament our explanations, rationalizations, deflections and self-justifications. We confess our callousness and convenient blindness. We lament our complicity in a world that advantages some and disadvantages others on the basis of the color of their skin and we repent.

We need to do this together as a church. So this Thursday night at 7:00 p.m. on Zoom, our pastoral team is going to host a time to listen and lament. We want to hear from all of you about how you're grieving right now and what your fears are. We especially want to hear from our brothers and sisters of color in our church family—and we want to hear from our law enforcement officers. We want to hear your stories of pain and redemption and pray prayers of lament together like we see in so many of the Psalms. So please join us for this on Thursday night at 7:00.

We want our lives together as a church family to practice what Peter sums up in this section in verse 17: *“Honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”* Peter is cutting the emperor down to size here. He starts with everyone and ends with “Honor the emperor.” He’s basically saying, “The emperor is a man just like everyone else.”

We’re not supposed to fawn over our public leaders as if they’re so much more important than the average guy on the street. No, every human being is to be treated with honor, dignity and respect, because every human being is created in the image of God. You shouldn’t treat your next-door neighbor with any less honor and respect than you would treat the President of the United States.

Now there’s a special relationship that goes beyond honor to deep love and that’s with our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are family. They are part of the body of which Jesus is the Head. His blood runs through them just as His blood runs through us. The love that the Head has for the body should flow between all its members so the world would know that we are His followers by the way we love one another. So honor everyone, including the emperor. Love the brothers and sisters in Christ. But there’s one and only one Whom we are to fear—fear God. Tremble in awe of Him. Our allegiance to Him transcends everything.

Oswald Chambers said it so well: “The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.”

Let's pray together.

Holy God, we marvel at the fearlessness of Peter, how he could write these words with the threat of Nero breathing down his neck. He is so full of hope and confidence in the way Your church can shine as a bright light in the darkness of this world. We want to be luminous for You, Father. We want to have a reputation of good works that silences the foolish talk of Your enemies. And we want to love in such a way that many of Your enemies become our friends through the reconciling work of Jesus Your Son on the cross.

Help us especially in this time of humbling in our nation that we would be people of immense love, wisdom, compassion, humility and understanding. Enlarge the scope of our fellowship to include more and more of the tribes, tongues and nations with whom we will be gathered before Your throne, worshiping the Lamb in glory. Help us live in such a way that all people whom You have created experience the dignity, honor and love that belongs to Your image bearers in this world. All for Your glory we pray, for You alone are to be feared and worshiped, in the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit—one God, now and forevermore. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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