

“God, the Government, & the Gospel”

1 Peter 2:13-17

The recipients of Peter’s letter were living under precarious circumstances. Though they were citizens of the kingdom of God, they were also citizens of the kingdom of man. Those two kingdoms were in conflict. As the citizens of heaven, they were to be ambassadors for Christ’s sake. And as citizens of Rome, they were responsible to be law-abiding and submissive. The time would soon come, however, where those two kingdoms would be at odds. Under Nero, the first wave of Roman imperial persecution would be unleashed. Under such a regime, those who refused to worship the emperor would be viewed as political traitors to Rome and would find themselves torn to pieces by wild animals in Roman arenas. That day had not yet arrived, but would not be far off. These Christians to whom Peter writes were experiencing their own fair share of hardships from the hands of local authorities. Peter’s words in this text we’re going to look at must be weighed in view of just how shocking they are. *“Honor the emperor.”*

In no way am I prepared to deal in an in-depth way with how Christians are to be involved in politics. I’ll save that for a couple of upcoming Wednesday night messages in my current series. In this sermon, I want to address this text at hand and show you how Peter calls upon Christians to be submissive in our approach to human institutions. I realize that this creates conflict in our thinking. Does this passage imply that we are to submit to the government of man *no matter what?* Are there ever any legitimate reasons for Christians to join causes that result in civil unrest? If you don’t think so, imagine you are a Christian living way back in the 1770’s in the American colonies. Or a Christian living in the commonwealth of Virginia in the 1860’s. This issue is not as easy as you think.

In America's colonial days, there was division in the church about how Christians should respond to the increasingly revolutionary spirit of the times. In fact, there were two main groups of people—the Loyalists (those who were loyal to the British crown), and the Revolutionaries (those who were ready to go to war with England).

We tend to forget that there were God-fearing, Bible-believing people on both sides of the debate.

Samuel Seabury was a clergyman on the Loyalist side. He felt that it was immoral to rise up against the government, even citing this text from 1 Peter as his main argument. You also had a man named Peter Muhlenberg who was a clergyman on the Revolutionary side. He took the position that there were times when it was necessary, even moral, to rise up against tyranny. He cited Solomon's wisdom from the book Ecclesiastes for his argument:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8—“For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up...a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”

At the time, given the current state of taxation and British tyranny, Muhlenberg felt it was a time for war, and thus led his church to embrace the cause of the Revolution.

Now, it is easy for us to look back in retrospect at history and make a judgment call from victory's side. But what if you were one of Seabury's or Muhlenberg's parishioners?

What is the Christian's responsibility to society, and to the government in particular, if we are 'exiles' in this world?

What are our 'gospel' obligations? Well, this is what I hope to tackle in our time remaining this morning. In doing so, I want to make a few observations from this text.

1. The ROLE of government in society

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

Human government serves a very legitimate purpose in the overall plans and purposes of God. Whenever you realize that government is an institution that is ordained by God, it changes your understanding of it.

Chuck Colson, in his book "Kingdoms in Conflict," point out the fact that "wise thinkers have long recognized the need for the transcendent authority of religion to give society its legitimacy and essential cohesion." One of the strongest arguments for this was made by a Roman philosopher and politician named Cicero, who even said that "religion is indispensable to private morals and public order, and no man of sense would ever attack it."

Augustine, the Christian theologian and philosopher who lived in the fourth century, in his famous work "City of God," argued that the essence of public harmony could only be found in justice, the source of which is divine. He asked, "In the absence of justice, what is the government but organized robbery?"

Before I get to what Peter says here, it is helpful to think of the different governments of the world generally falling under three categories:

Government under God

This was what the founders of America envisioned for our free society. The inherently American ideal of limited government was founded upon this principle. America's Declaration of Independence reflects such understanding:

“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them to another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men...”

Our nation's Pledge of Allegiance reflects a 'government under God' type of understanding. It emerged out of the Civil War, written by Francis Bellamy, and was formally adopted by Congress in 1942. “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God...”

John Adams — *“Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.”*

Government without God

Regardless of what anyone says to the contrary, our nation was founded with an 'under God' type of understanding. A new type of understanding began to emerge in the last century, and that is one of government without God. Many of

the world's different governmental structures hold to this philosophy. God is kept out of political conversation.

Government that is God

The Christians in Peter's day were living under this type of government, especially when emperor worship became an expectation of Rome's citizens. Christians had to make a choice—as citizens will we worship God alone, or will we burn incense to the emperor? Believers knew that they had a cross to bear. Jesus was the only King worthy of worship. They bowed to God, not government.

As a means of His common grace, God graciously intends for humanity to be governed. Even though Adam forfeited his place as co-regent with God way back in the fall, God still keeps our fallen world held together through His common grace. I want you to notice that Peter mentions a two-fold purpose that government serves:

- To punish those who do evil
- To praise those who do good

God uses the governments of world to restrain evil and to carry out justice, even though the governmental structures are far from perfect. Even the governments headed by evil dictators that are inherently evil to the core, that should be overthrown, ultimately serve the purpose of a sovereign God. They are subject to Him!

Paul makes this same argument in Romans 13, which is the clearest and most specific passage in the New Testament on what a Christian's response to civil authority should look like. Paul says:

Romans 13:1-7—“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”

According to Paul, much in the same way that Peter says, government serves the purpose of restraining evil and promoting good. At its most basic function, that is what the government must do. The real issue for the church comes in when the government has a different definition for what is evil and for what is good.

Many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world grapple with this issue in ways that we find hard to imagine. Think of the situation of Christians who live underground in North Korea or Iran. Coming together for worship is an act of sedition. Even possessing a Bible is a high crime.

Are they in the wrong for doing so?

Not when you understand that our ultimate allegiance lies with the Lord Jesus Christ. Whenever the policies of the city of man are in opposition to the principles of the city of God, we always go with God. Even if it means arrest, prison, or torture and death in extreme cases. Again, we bow to God, not the government.

2. The RESPONSIBILITY of God's people in society

“Be subject for the Lord's sake...For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

Government serves a role in our lives that is ordained by God, and God intends for you and me to live as those who have God-given responsibility. As the citizens of two kingdoms, what does our responsibility involve? How are we to live in the city of man, even though we are citizens of the city of God?

Peter mentions three responsibilities that we have:

Our submission

Peter tells his readers that they are to be ‘subject’ for the Lord's sake to every human institution.

“Be Subject” — *translates a Greek word that was also a military expression that meant to arrange in formation under the commander*

Have you ever watched a company of soldiers whenever a commanding officer or general is present? Give attention!

The idea is that we willingly submit ourselves under the authority of another. We are to be ‘subject.’ That word was used to describe citizens of a monarchy where a king was said to have had loyal or disloyal ‘subjects.’ While we live in a free society, our freedom is still within governmental bounds.

Notice that Peter says we are to be subject to these human institutions ‘for the Lord’s sake.’ As Christian citizens, we submit to civil authority because we recognize the source behind it. That is, our citizenship in the city of man is to be viewed as an act of worship. I obey the laws of man in view of my responsibility to God. What might this look like?

When I’m behind the wheel of my car, I obey traffic laws for the Lord’s sake. When I exercise my right to vote, I enter the ballot box for the Lord’s sake. When I make comments about current or past Presidents, I do so for the Lord’s sake. Even though we may not agree with someone’s policies, that is never an excuse for us to slander the man.

I need to point out the fact that the command here us for us to submit to the ‘institution’ that is ordained by God.

“Institution” — *creation or ordinance*

It doesn’t refer to each individual law, but the institutions that make and enforce them. There are times when the laws of man are in opposition to the laws of God. What then? Throughout the Bible, you will find examples of godly men and women who submitted to the institutions while disobeying the laws that violated their conscience.

One example is Daniel and his three friends. (Daniel 1-3)

Or, there's the example of Peter himself in the book of Acts. There was a time when he was threatened by the civil authorities to keep silent about Christ.

How did he respond?

Acts 4:18-20—“So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’”

Something similar has happened in our country involving several bakeries owned and operated by Christians who refuse to violate their conscience or compromise their convictions. By refusing to bake and create a wedding cake for same-sex couples, they've opened themselves up to lawsuit and fines. The U.S. Supreme Court is reviewing such a case right now involving a Colorado man. The ruling is expected sometime this summer, and it will be a watershed moment for the future of Christian companies.

Our interaction

Notice that Peter is not advocating an approach to life that is disengaged from society. Rather, he once more calls on his readers to 'do good.' Doing good is the will of God.

As Christians, we are to be involved in the different levels of society wherever opportunity affords. We are to be stewards of the manifold grace of God, leveraging our jobs and vocations for the gospel's sake.

Peter says in verse 15:

“For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

The word for ‘silence’ used there literally means to muzzle, and the idea is that by doing good, Peter’s readers would prove false the slander that was being spread about them. It would afford them the opportunity to share the gospel.

I recognize that many of you are serving in multiple levels of government and public service, and as your pastor, I am grateful to God for that. The mayor of our city attends our church, as does the chief of police. As public servants, you have responsibilities to all citizens our city who come from a variety of backgrounds, who hold to multiple views.

And yet your faith in Jesus trumps everything, so much so that when you are forced to choose, you choose Jesus.

Let me tell you something—in a pluralistic society, one that buys into the whole ‘government without God’ type of understanding, it may become increasingly difficult for Christians to serve in high levels of government, or to own businesses that provide services. You may be faced with the pressure to choose between your faith and your job.

Church, this is why we must diligently pray for our leaders. We need to pray that God gives them both the wisdom and grace they need to make decisions, as well as the courage to stand for what is right no matter what.

Our motivation

What is our ultimate motive or end goal? Peter says that we are to live as those who are free, not using our freedom as a license to do evil, but as the servants of

God. Just because we are free in Jesus Christ doesn't mean that we are free from our responsibilities as citizens.

We live in a country where we are free to share our faith. No one is holding a gun to our head telling us that we must remain silent or else. Why not learn to better use our freedom as the servants of God, and for Christ's sake?

God help us not wait until it is too late. Right now, born again Christians are free to interact with society, to participate in government, to do so as servants of God.

3. The RESULT of the gospel in society

"Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

How could these Christians show such honor and respect to those who were persecuting them for their faith? Their first reaction would no doubt be one of retaliation. You hurt me, I'm going to hurt you back! You curse me, I'm going to curse you back! Instead, they were to show honor.

They could only do such a thing because of the result of the gospel in their lives. Jesus Christ had changed them from the inside out. They now possessed God's Spirit.

Let me tell you something—there seems to be a generation of believers who have confused the gospel itself with the results that it produces. Rather than seeking to be Christ's ambassadors, the shift is now on affecting social change, all the while our original mission is neglected.

The gospel must never be confused with the change that it brings. The gospel is an announcement. It is the good news that God has provided humanity with a Savior who has suffered in the sinner's place and is now resurrected, ascended, glorified, and coming again. The gospel is the announcement that sinners

everywhere must now repent and trust in Jesus alone for salvation from their sins. Those who have must now follow Him in baptism and discipleship.

Let me tell you something else—we also confuse sin with its symptoms. To do so is misdiagnose. You don't merely give Tylenol to a man who has a malignant brain tumor. You get that man to a surgeon who has the skill to deal with that man's core problem.

Racism is not our core problem.

Same-sex marriage is not our core problem.

Abortion is not our core problem.

Our core problem is the radically depraved nature of our hearts, and the only hope for a solution is a gospel cure. A man or woman lost in his or her sins desperately needs God to intervene. They need God to give them a new heart with new affections. They need God to remove their heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. Once that transformation happens, obedience and submission to God then comes from a new heart and a life that has been redeemed.

Let me give you some takeaways as I close, some things that you need to remember.

- Government is an institution that is essential for society, so be thankful for it.
- Government is an institution that is ordained by God, so be submissive to it.
- Government is an institution that is imperfect, so be praying for it.

1 Timothy 2:1-3—“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all

who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior.”

How much time do you devote to praying for civil authority?

Prayer is our primary work. When God’s people were held as captives in the city of Babylon, He commanded them:

Jeremiah 29:7—“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”

2 Corinthians 10:3-5—“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

While the government is ordained by God to restrain evil and promote good, the church has been tasked with the Great Commission. We must never allow our focus to become shifted from our ultimate mission, one that is not ultimately social in nature, nor is it political in nature, but is spiritual. True change begins from the inside and works its way on the outside. We are a kingdom of priests, not activists.

As citizens of God’s kingdom, we are Christ’s ambassadors on earth. We know that humanity’s greatest need is to be reconciled to God. And we’ve been given the word of ‘reconciliation,’ which is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to carry the news of Christ’s death and resurrection to all the world, calling upon men and women to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus for salvation. As model citizens,

we are to make disciples and seek the common good of all. We are to lovingly promote the truth, even when faced with opposition from those who disagree. Pray that we are never put in the position to choose between our two citizenships —because our ultimate allegiance always rests with King Jesus.