

## How Should a Christian Respond to the Government?

Pastor Jeremy Cagle

January 10, 2021

Hello, and thank you for joining us for another online message here at Grace Fellowship Church. As many of you know, it's always a little awkward when you are there watching from your computer or watching from home and I'm here in this lonely old church building by myself. But we are grateful for the technology to do this. We are grateful that the Lord has allowed us to continue our ministry in this most unusual way.

And just to say a few words about that. I'm sure many of you are also aware that the government recently announced on Friday that the state of emergency will continue for another 30 days here in BC. The current lockdown will continue for another month. Which means this way of meeting with you at home and me here on the computer will go on for a while, which is not what we were hoping for. We want to be together. We want to be able to meet again. I don't have to tell you this is a painful time for us here at Grace. This is a difficult time because our people love each other; they love being together. Separation is hard for us, which is a good thing. We should not want to be separated, because we love each other.

In fact, one of the things that struck me the most about Grace Fellowship Church, when I first visited, was the warmth and friendliness of the people. I remember you guys would talk to each other for hours, and I mean hours. I mean all night if you could. One of the first times my family actually came here, we came on a Sunday, and we did a Sunday morning service. We had a barbecue with the church. And that night, my wife and I had to go back to the airport to fly back to Indiana. It was about six o'clock at night. And she turned to me in the car and said, "They're still talking!" Because that's the kind of church we have. And that's the kind of people we have. You guys just enjoy the fellowship so much, which makes this really difficult. And we're hoping it won't go on for much longer.

You can add to this that this is challenging because it is something that we've really never seen before. We have never faced this in our lifetime, where the government has told churches not to meet. Or even where a state of emergency has been extended for so long. Usually a state of emergency only lasts for a couple days at the most, maybe a week in extreme cases, but it doesn't last for months. That is a very unusual thing. Strange situation. Frankly, it makes it hard to know how to respond. But I want to let you know that our elder board is working on a reply and a plan of action to the situation. And we will let you know something soon. We don't want to keep you waiting on that. But this is not the time for quick responses. This is not the time to shoot from the hip and fly off the cuff. It's a time to let cool heads prevail. And that is what we want to do as an elder board. We would appreciate your prayers.

When you read the Bible, one thing you see over and over again is the need to be wise in times like this. The need to be sober minded. And the word sober minded, it means not full of wine, or not full of passion to the point that you lose your head. I mean to the point that you lose your cool because it can be so easy to do that in a time like this. It can be so easy to get so passionate and worked up that you literally lose your head. You lose the ability to

think, and we don't want to respond that way. As a church we see people doing that today. That is a terrible mistake to make. We want to give a measured response to these things. We want to give a sober response.

And that leads me to what I want to talk to you about today. This morning, we are starting a brand-new series here at Grace called “The Christian and the Government”. That's the title of it. It is a four-part series on the Christian and the government, because we want to address something that's on everybody's mind right now. We want to address something that you are seeing over and over again in the news and on social media and things like that. And that is how is the church supposed to respond to the government right now? How is it supposed to respond to this current situation?

I don't think I have to tell you this is nothing new in history. It is nothing new to see the church asking questions like that. It's new to us. It's new to people in Canada in many ways, because we've had such a wonderful relationship with the government. But people have asked that question before. So, the Bible has a lot of answers. When we open its pages, what does it tell us? That is what this new series is about.

And as we start this, we are going to look at several things, like, what is the role of the government and what is the role of the church? We are going to look at the job of each. We are going to look at the tasks that God has given them, as well as their boundaries and limitations. That is where a lot of the problem arises, when they forget their roles. They forget that they have boundaries. They think they can do whatever they want. Or they can cross over however they please. But God has given each one a certain realm to operate in. God has given each institution a certain sphere of influence. So, we are going to talk about that.

We are also going to talk about what part the Kingdom of God plays in all this, because there is a Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. There is a kingdom where God is in charge, and He rules and He reigns, and He calls the shots. And then there is a kingdom where man does, to some degree, anyway. There is a kingdom where man rules in some small capacity. And we are going to talk about how those two go together; how they coincide. That's what this new series is about. We're going to do a survey of what the Bible says about the government, the church and the state. This series will take us through the month of January. It will be a pretty short series.

I also want to let you know that it is not my intention to be controversial in this series. It is not my goal to stir up controversy. There seems to be enough controversy going on. This won't be that kind of series. In fact, it's going to be the opposite, because I want to calm things down for us. I want to settle things down with this material. I know that a lot of people are nervous right now. They are jumpy. I just want to remind you, you don't have to be that way. You don't have to be nervous right now. Because the Bible is sufficient. It has all the answers you need for these types of questions. You can trust in it, you can rest in it. As Charles Spurgeon said, “You can put your head on the pillow of the Word of God.”. You'll be fine. And that is what this new series is about.

And with all that said this morning, what I'd like to do is just get it started by talking about how a Christian should respond to the government. That is the million-dollar question. That's the thing on everyone's mind, if you want to boil it all down into one question. Let's just jump right on in. What are we supposed to do when the government gives us laws? What are we supposed to do when they give us orders? Some that we like, some that we don't like. How are we supposed to interact with that?

And to answer this, please turn in your Bibles to the book of Acts chapter 5. And as you are turning there, you may wonder where would you start a series like this? Where would you begin on such a big topic? Because there is a lot to discuss. There is a lot that you could address. So where would you even kick it off? The answer is the book of Acts. It's a great place to begin. And I'll tell you why in just a moment, but first, I just want to read our passage to you. So, if you would, look in Acts, chapter 5, and we are going to start in verse 17. There, the author says this:

(Acts 5:17-32)

“But the high priest stood up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and leading them out, he said, “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple area the whole message of this Life.”

Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple area about daybreak and began to teach. Now, when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, that is all the Senate of the sons of Israel and sent orders to the prison for them to be brought. But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported, saying, “We found the prison locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.”

Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple area and teaching the people!”

Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned). When they had brought them, they had them stand before the Council. The high priest interrogated them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this Man's blood upon us.”

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God, rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

We will end the reading there. Just to say a few words about this passage, as many of you know, the book of Acts is the history book of the early church. It tells us how it all began. Every major movement has a beginning; every major organization has a start somewhere. And this is the start of the early church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, “I say to you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

The Book of Acts tells you how Jesus built his church, and hell itself did not prevail against it. And neither did the government, we might add. As you read through the book of Acts, one thing you notice is that over and over again the government tried to do that. Over and over again, the church faced a lot of opposition, and the majority

of it came from its political leaders. It came from religious leaders as well. This is why the whole issue of church and state is not a new question because it was asked from the very beginning.

For example, the first government that the church had to face in its history was the Jewish government, or the nation of Israel. That is what you see here in this passage, which makes sense because they were the ones who crucified Jesus. They were the ones who put Him on trial to kill Him. It only makes sense they would fight his disciples. The next government that the church had to face was the government of Rome. It had to face the biggest government of its day, the largest one, the Roman Empire. The ancient world was very messy when it came to the issue of politics. It was like a gong-show, far worse than what you see today, because it was ruled by the Romans. It was dominated by them, but it was governed by the Jews. They ran the show on the ground, and the church had to fight a war on two fronts. It all started here in the book of Acts. This is where the war began for the early Christians. It started in Acts chapter 4 and continued into Acts chapter 5.

Just to give you the background for this. Acts 4 tells us that Peter had performed a miracle in the temple. He healed a man right outside the temple gates, which was an innocent thing to do. It was a very good thing to do, but it drew a lot of attention, drew a big crowd. And as a result of that, the Jews brought him in for questioning. In chapter 4:18, it says they summoned him or some of the apostles (or Peter and John, I believe), and commanded them not to speak at all in the name of Jesus. In other words, they put a gag order on them. They silenced these two guys (which they didn't keep, by the way). They didn't obey the gag order. Because Peter tells him in verse 20, he says, "For we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." In other words, we can't do what you're asking us to do. We can't follow that order, because we can't stop speaking about Christ, even if it offends you.

Which leads to another altercation in this chapter, which is what I just read you. This one again, the apostles are minding their own business. They're just healing people, helping them, preaching the gospel. And chapter 5:17 says, "But the high priest rose up along with all his associates, that is the sect of the Sadducees. They were filled with jealousy and they laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail."

And I'll say more about that in a moment. I'm going to walk you through this passage. But I want you to focus your attention down in verse 29. Because it really sums up what this is about. It really sums up what's at stake here. In verse 29, as this trial is going on, and Peter gives his defense, he explains what he's doing, and what they're all doing. Essentially, he is a spokesman for the apostles. He says these words, very brief, very succinct, but this is the issue. He says, "We must obey God, rather than men."

That's quite a statement there. And it's very blunt, just a handful of words here, but it really paints the picture. Peter says, we respect you. We appreciate you. We are submitting to your leadership because we're on trial here. I'll tell you in a moment that when they went to the trial, at least the second part of it, they went of their own freewill. But what he says here is "We don't answer to you first, first we answer to God. We don't submit to you first, first we submit to Him. Peter says let's just get that straight at the outset here, let's just put that on the table.

Peter says there is a Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. That's very plain in Scripture. There's a kingdom where God is in control, and God rules, and God calls the shots. And there's a kingdom where a man does to some degree anyway, in his own small capacity. And when they clash, Peter says, when they butt heads, we go with God. We follow Him, no matter the cost, no matter the consequences. I mention this because I think there's so

much confusion surrounding this today. This is why we're doing this series. There's so much perplexity surrounding this topic.

The world sees what we are doing today. They see how the church is responding to the coronavirus and the pandemic, and the conversation we are having. They don't get it. They don't understand. Because we want to go to church right now. We want to worship God together, in public and face-to-face. We want to sing together and pray together. We want to preach together and teach together. We want to read scripture together. They don't want to do that at all. They have no interest in those things whatsoever. And therefore, they don't understand what we do. Sometimes they are rude about it. Sometimes they are not rude about it. It is because we come from two different kingdoms. It is because we belong to two different realms.

Peter says we have a different Lord; we have a different Master. And it gives us a different set of priorities. It gives us a different set of values. Which is why there is this clash. We can say it this way. Friends, this is what separates a Christian from a non-Christian at the end of the day. This is what separates a believer from an unbeliever. And that is that a believer has been born again. A believer has been born into something new. And as such he has a new heart and a new soul and a new mind. He has a new will and a new nature and a new disposition. He has new priorities, new values, new inclinations, everything is new for him. Everything is brand-new. II Corinthians 5:17, says he is a new creature. You can't get any newer than that. And an unbeliever doesn't have that. A lost person has not experienced any of that. They are the same old creature. They have the same old mind, the same old nature, and therefore they don't know what this is like. This is like speaking Greek to them. The whole thing is confusing.

For example, in this passage, Peter says "I'm Jewish". He says, I'm a Hebrew just like you guys. I'm an Israelite come from the same nation, come from the same race. But my loyalties don't ultimately lie with that. My allegiance goes higher than that. It goes bigger than that. My loyalty goes to God. Quite a thing to say to the high priest, by the way, quite a thing to say to the leaders of Israel. They thought they spoke for God, but they didn't. They had sold that out long ago. Peter says my loyalty goes higher.

And friends, it is the same way with you. It's the same way with your loyalties this morning. Listen, you may be Canadian. You may have been born in this wonderful country of Canada, but your allegiance doesn't ultimately lie here. Not if you are a Christian. Your loyalties don't end with this country. You have a heavenly country. You have a realm that's above the stars and that's where your loyalty lies. In fact, our church is so diverse, so multicultural, that I could say you may be Haitian, or Mexican, or South African. You may be Australian, or American or German. You may be Malaysian, or Slovakian or Dutch, but your loyalty does not lie with any of that. It lies with Christ and lies with God. It lies with something that transcends all these things. And you need to remember that and act accordingly. This is the basis of everything in the Christian life. This is the basis of all that we do.

The church is not a physical institution, so it's not based on physical things (carnal things, fleshly things). It is based on spiritual things. That is why some of you have told me that the closest relationships you have on earth are in the church. The closest friendships you have are with the people of God. This is why. You have more in common with them than you have with anybody else. You have more that unites you. All that other stuff is peripheral; all that other stuff is secondary. This is the most important thing.

Friends, Peter's not saying here that you should look for trouble, because he did not do that. He is not saying you should go out and try to find trouble and stir it up like some people do with the government. Because he did not respond that way. He was very respectful to the government. He was very gracious to them. But he says when trouble comes, this is what you have to do. When the conflict arises, and the two worlds collide, we must obey God rather than men. That is the foundation of everything in the Christian life, and not just the government. Kick the government to the side for a minute. This is the foundation for it all.

One commentator said it this way. He said to live this way, requires a certain degree of courage. Peter never asked a question here. "Is this going to be easy for me?" He never asked, "Is this course of action going to be safe? Is it going to make me popular and advance my position and give me a higher salary?"

He simply wanted to know "Will this please God?" That is all Peter wanted to know here. Will this bring Him glory? And that is what we need to ask this morning. That needs to be in the forefront of all our minds. That's how a Christian responds to the government. By first and foremost asking the question, "Will this bring glory to God?"

If you are taking notes in Acts chapter 5, we're going to look at two responses that a Christian should have with the government. That is our outline for this morning. We're going to look at this because so many people approach this issue the wrong way. So many people look at the pandemic and the coronavirus and the lockdowns and all the chaos that we are seeing right now. They look at it from the wrong perspective, the wrong direction. Because they want to ask the question, "Is this is going to be safe for me?" They start off wanting to know is this going to be easy and advance my position in life and make me popular and that sort of thing when you don't need to be asking those things. That doesn't need to be on your mind. You need to be thinking of higher things. Like the glory of God.

You have been born again; you have been made new. And so, you don't look at things the old way anymore. You don't look at things the way the world does. You look at them through brand new eyes of faith. You know, if you think about it, so much of our trouble as Christians comes from thinking low thoughts, doesn't it? So much of our problem in the Christian life comes from seeing things down here. Seeing things on the earthly level. God wants us to see things up here, he wants us to see things higher. And that is what we are going to do this morning. We are going to sit in this trial with Peter, sit in this courtroom with the apostles, and see things from a high perspective.

And as we do that, we are going to look at two responses that a Christian should have to the government. And the first one is this:

**We should obey God first.** The first response a Christian should have to the government is that we should obey God first, which means that that should be our top concern. That is our number one priority. When trials and tribulations come, we need to think about Him above all else. Our minds need to go heavenward before they go earthward.

If you look in verse 17, it says, "But the high priests rose up, along with all his associates, (that is the sect of the Sadducees) and they were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out, he said, Go, stand and

speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life. And upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to teach.”

You notice, as you read this in the beginning, the author tells you why this happened. It tells you why this altercation took place. And it's not because the Jews were zealous for God. You would hope that would be the case, being that this is the high priest, this is the highest religious position in the land. But that is not the case. You would hope it would be because they were passionate for His name, but that is not what you read here. It's because (verse 17 says) they were filled with jealousy, “indignation” as the King James says it, which means they didn't have a little bit of jealousy, they had a lot of it. They didn't have just a smidgen of it, they were overcome with the green-eyed monster because of the success of the church. Because it had grown so popular among the people.

We often don't think about this, but there were 1000s of converts in the early church. Acts chapter 2 tells us that Peter preached a sermon in which 3,000 believed and were saved. That is a lot of people, especially for the beginning of a new church, right? And then, as you read on, chapter 4 talks about more being added. Chapter 5, tells us in verse 14, “and all the more, believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number.” That idea of constantly being added means they just kept coming in and coming in and coming into the church. The high priest saw this, and he was jealous. And it actually says here, there was the high priest, and all his associates, and the sect of the Sadducees. And then later down in verse 21, it says that the council did this as well. They called the council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel.

And there is some debate as to what that means. There is some discussion among scholars as to who this was, but most believe this was a reference to the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling council of 71 men that made a lot of the major decisions in Israel. They called a lot of the shots behind the scenes. I just told you politics was very messy at this time. It was a lot of fingers in the pie, a lot of hands in the puzzle. But the point here is that all of them were involved in this. All of the leaders of the Jews were agreed on this one thing--that the church had to stop, or it had to slow down or something. It filled them with jealousy. So, they arrested the apostles and threw them in jail. That was their response.

They put them in prison before the trial, which didn't work, by the way. As you read on the text, it tells you it didn't accomplish anything. Because verse 19 says sometime during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the gates and let them out. Now, this is one of those scenes in the Bible. Don't you wish you would have been there? I mean, what would it look like for an angel to show up in a jail? I don't know a whole lot of prisoners, but I'm sure a lot of them have prayed for an angel. I'm sure a lot of them have prayed to experience this. This was totally, totally miraculous, out of the blue. A messenger from God came down from heaven, showing that he approved of what they were doing, and he released them. And we don't know what that looked like, the text here doesn't say. He could have touched the cell door. He could have shaken it. He could have just spoken to it. But whatever the case, it says in verse 19, he opened the gates of the prison and took them out.

And we know what he said because he tells them this in verse 20. He says, “Go stand and speak to the people in the temple, the whole message of life”. In other words, I'm not doing this so you can run away, guys. I'm not doing this so you can make a break for it and go be safe and comfortable the rest of your life. That's not why I'm releasing you. That's not why this is happening. I'm letting you out so you can go to the temple and tell them about the message of Life. I am letting you out so you can leave this prison and go right back to the most public

place in Israel and preach the gospel. the very place that was run by the Sanhedrin, and the high priests and all these guys here.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think I would have had a problem with that. I mean, If I was in these guys' shoes, the apostle shoes, I would have had an argument with the angel right there in the jail cell. I mean, they just got out of trouble. Now he's telling them to go back into it. They just got out of jail, and now he was essentially telling to go back and risk their lives again. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. But the apostles do it anyway. They listen to the angel because they want to do obey God, rather than man.

Obeying God always comes with a price, doesn't it? Pleasing Him always comes with a sacrifice. It is never easy. It is never comfortable. We should not even think of it in those terms.

Last week we talked about the book of Malachi as a church, and we saw that the Jews were bringing blind and lame sacrifices to God. They were bringing Him worthless offerings; they cost them nothing. And God rejected them. He said, I don't want those. He wants more than that. He wants all that you have. And it is the same way with us. God doesn't want your throwaways. He doesn't want your trash. He wants everything that you have. And that's always painful. That's always hard. It comes with a price.

And that leads to several applications here to your lives and to our current situation. For one thing, this means the church needs to speak publicly. That is one way this applies to us. The church needs to speak publicly, and out in the open for all to hear. That is what the apostles did. That is what the angel told them to do when they had a direct message from heaven telling them to do this. He does not tell them to hide in a corner; he does not tell them to meet in secret; he doesn't tell them to whisper the message or hush the message or pass it along on the sly. He tells them to stand up and teach in the most public place in the city of Jerusalem, in the temple, which was not safe, but it didn't matter. Because this is what the church has to do.

You would think the angel might tell them to go into hiding here. That seems like the most reasonable thing to do. You might think he would tell them to disappear because they were stirring up some trouble. Let things calm down. He didn't do that. Instead, he tells him to speak the whole message of the Life. And that phrase "whole message" in verse 20, means the apostles were to speak the entire thing in the temple. In other words, they were not to give a sermonette, a little pep talk. This was to be extensive. This was to be at length, they were to say everything they could think of about Jesus.

Talk as long as possible - the idea here is talk until they come and stop you. Because that is what the church does. We get up here every week and tell you about Jesus. That has been the pattern since the beginning. We are never done explaining Him. We are never done preaching Him. We are never done talking. I heard one pastor say, you get to the end of a sermon and you kind of feel like a kid with a bucket in front of the ocean. You've never scratched the surface; you've never gone deep enough. You can't.

That's the kind of God we have. In fact, the church should say it like this. The church is a public institution. It is a public organization. It exists in order to be seen. It exists in order to be heard. That's what it does in the world. We are not to hide our light under a bushel.



There may be times when we can't do that for various reasons, and that's okay. There may be times when we can't be seen like we would want to be in public because of persecution or trials or things like the coronavirus. I mean, that is understandable. But that's not the norm. That's not the standard for the church, it always goes back to this. The church needs to speak publicly. That is its mission.

Which leads to another application here, and that is that the church needs to keep doing this. The church needs to keep speaking publicly and meeting out in the open. Like I just said, it can take a break for a while, but not for long. And this is something you see over and over again in the book of Acts. Starting in chapter 8, a persecution breaks out against the church. Starting in that chapter, the whole thing comes under attack. Right here, it is just the leaders. It is just the apostles that are in prison. But in chapter 7 they kill Stephen, the first martyr. It killed one of the deacons. So, if you are ever thinking about being a deacon, I just want to let you know the danger of the job. One of the first ones got killed.

And from there, it spreads out; they go after every Christian they can find. And this is what the church did as it is scattered. It went through the whole world, speaking and preaching the name of Christ. It went through the whole world meeting publicly. Sometimes it was more public and sometimes it was less public, depending on the circumstances. Sometimes it looked one way and sometimes it looked another way, depending maybe on the persecution that was going on where they went. But they kept going back to the public ministry of the word.

This is such a big deal today. This is such a big topic, because when you talk to people right now, in the Christian community, the question always comes up. Does the church have to meet in order to be the church? It doesn't have to be face-to-face in order to be a body of Christ. Can I just do it online? Can I just do it over the internet? It is a very common question right now, you're hearing it a lot. And it's an important question.

So, it might be good to say a few words about that. It's been asked before in church history in different ways. For example, in the first century, the apostles wrote letters to the early church. They wrote parchments to the early believers that they could read and learn by. And some of them probably wondered, in times of persecution, can't we just read this and have church that way? Can we just look at this by ourselves in secret when no one else is around so the government can't find us? And the apostles said no. The early leaders said no. I mean, you may do that every once in a while. But that is not the norm. Again, that's not the pattern. Because the church needs to meet, you need to be with other Christians, they said.

And then several centuries later, the printing press was invented. Johann Gutenberg invented his movable type. And now people started asking the same thing about books. They wondered, can't we just read those and have church that way? Can we just take our books and our library to the monastery, or to the nunnery, or to the mountaintop and leave the world behind and not have any interaction anymore? And Christian leaders said, no.

This was a real big deal in the Protestant Reformation. A lot of the reformers really battled this because that was a popular idea in the Catholic Church, the idea of monasteries, and things like that. The reformers said, no, the church needs to be together. God wants us to do more than just read a book.

Then the radio was invented. And people asked that question there. And then the television was invented. And you saw the same thing with that. And then the internet was invented. And now it is happening with this. In fact,

the internet has really changed a lot of things in church history, at least it has changed the tone of this discussion, because now you can see people that you are talking to online. That's why we're doing this! You can talk to them face-to-face. Or at least on a computer screen, you can see their face. But the problem is that people need to see what you are like when the screen is turned off, right? I mean, people need to see what you are like when the zoom call is over. Because this church is supposed to be a community. It is supposed to be a family. And you don't get that on a computer. It's just not enough.

Several weeks ago, our elders sent out an email to our church where we listed a number of passages that talked about the need for the church to meet publicly. They talked about the need for the church to meet in the open and addressed some of these issues. And I can't go into all these verses for the sake of time, but just to mention a few of them here: I Timothy 4:13, says, "Until I come give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching."

The word "public" there means just what it says. It means you are to do these things publicly. You are to do them openly for all to see. Paul says until he returns, Timothy, in the early church, is to read scripture, give exhortation and teach it publicly. There is no ambiguity in that. There is really no room for misunderstanding. And then another passage, Matthew 28, verse 19, says the same thing about baptism. There, Jesus says, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

I don't have to tell you that you have to do that publicly as well. You have to do that face-to-face, because there's no other way to baptize someone. You can't baptize someone from a computer screen. You can't baptize someone from a zoom call, it just can't be done. It doesn't even make sense.

First Corinthians 11, verse 26, says the same thing about the Lord's Supper. It says you need to take that in such a way that you proclaim the Lord's death. until He comes. That means you proclaim it when you are together; you are proclaiming it with other Christians in the same room. So people can hear it and see it. Colossians 3:16 says the same thing about worship and music. Matthew 18 and first Corinthians 5 say the same thing about church discipline.

But the point is that all of these things are to be done the same way. They are all to be done in the same manner. They are all public ministries of the church. The Bible is unanimous on that. It is consistent. It does not have one set of verses telling us how to do church one way and another set of verses telling us how to do a church another way. They all say the same thing. And again, I'm not saying that there aren't times where we have to meet like this or do things like this, where we're online. I'm saying it always goes back to the public ministry of the Word.

It makes such a point of this because if you watch the news right now, a lot of people are wondering what's wrong with churches that are meeting right now? Why are some people defying the lockdowns? And I can't speak for everybody. But I know for some of them, this is why they are doing that. Because the Lord has called us to meet. The Lord has called us to be together. And the government's telling us not to. Now, I know the government has reasons for that, they have their grounds for that. I'm just saying this is the dilemma that we are facing. This is the challenge.

I might add to this, that I don't think the government is persecuting us right now. I don't think they're out to get us. I know some Christians believe that right now. I don't think so. I just think they are ignoring us. I think they are

marginalizing us and pushing us to the side because we are not as “essential” as other things in their mind. We're not as important as some other groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous or things like that, because they feel like they do more for the community. So, this shouldn't make us angry as much as it should make us sad that they see us that way.

But all of this comes from the principle that we must obey God rather than man. That's what is driving the conflict. And I won't say more about that here, because again, we're going to do a whole series on this, and we will have more to say. But for now, it leads us to another point to consider. It leads us to another response that a Christian should have to the government, which balances this one out.

So, let me review the first one. The first one is that we should obey God first. The first response that a Christian should have to the government is that we should obey God, first, which means this is our number one priority. This is our number one concern as a church. We need to follow God first and foremost, above all else. If we are part of His Kingdom, if we are part of His realm, then our allegiance goes there before anywhere else. Which brings us to another point. By the way, that is uncomfortable at times. It is difficult but we can't waver on that. God is the one we seek to please and it leads us to this point:

The second response a Christian should have to the government is that **we should obey the government**. We should obey the governing authorities. Now, I know that sounds strange after what I just said, it seems maybe contradictory. But it's not because that's what the text says. That's what we see here. But just because your loyalty belongs to God, it doesn't mean you don't have other loyalties too. Just because your allegiance lies with Him it doesn't mean you don't have an allegiance to the government.

When you read this passage, there is a funny exchange taking place here between the apostles and their leaders. Verse 21 says that after arresting them, the high priest goes to the jail. He looks for the apostles, and he can't find them. He doesn't know where they are. And then when he finally finds them, they are in the most unusual place. Verse 25 says that they are in the temple right under his nose. They didn't go to the woods, they didn't run to the mountains, they went right where they could be found. And the story gets even crazier, because when the high priest sends for them, it says that they come. And if you look in verse 26, it says that they come without violence, without force, which means they didn't resist. They didn't put up a fight. In fact, there's a little sensitivity the guards have here. Apparently, the apostles are so popular with the people, it says that they were afraid they might be stoned if they rough them up.

So, you kind of get this picture of the apostles just walking into court, voluntarily, of their own volition. You would think that after being saved by an angel, they wouldn't do that. You would think that after these men have experienced such a miracle, and such a work of God, and such a stamp of approval from God, they might say, “Don't you know who I am?” Go to the high priests with their nose up high and say, don't you know what I just experienced? Why don't you leave me alone? Why don't you get lost? They don't say that. They are very respectful. Total opposite of what you might expect.

In fact, verse 27, says when they had brought them, they stood them before the council, and the high priest questioned them saying, “we gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name. And yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this Man's blood upon us”. But Peter and the apostles answer, “we must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you had put to death by

hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to his right hand as a prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

Now, I want you to notice Peter’s response, as you read this. He is very respectful. He is very calm and polite in this discussion. He is on trial. He is standing before his accusers. He is in a tense situation, but he doesn't yell, he doesn't holler, he doesn't stomp off in a huff the way some people do. None of that. He is gracious. And it gives them a clear answer to their question because this is how a Christian should respond to the government. This is what he should do. We should obey whenever possible. We should submit to the governing authorities whenever we can behave in a gracious manner and courteous manner.

And if you ever have to resist, you do it with clarity, like he does here. You do it by explaining what you are doing. Not in a huff. There's no huff about Peter’s tone here. I just told you that there is a Kingdom of God and there is a kingdom of man and the Kingdom of God comes first. I can't emphasize that enough. But whenever possible, you need to submit to the kingdom of men. Whenever possible, you need to make peace with it. And God actually tells you to do that. That's not just an assumption from this text; it's actually stated in Scripture.

For example, Romans 13:1 which we're going to talk about next week, says, “Every person needs to be in subjection to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.”

You notice Paul's line of argument here. He says that a Christian needs to be subject to the government; he needs to submit to the government. Why? Because government comes from God. The whole idea of it came from His hands. It was His idea in the first place. God could have made the world any way He wanted. He chose to put governments in it. So, to resist that is to resist Him. To stand against the government and say, “I don't have to answer anybody, I can do whatever I want”, is to stand against Him, because he doesn't want you to do that. That’s not His intention for you as a Christian, which leads to some applications here.

For one, this means we should be supportive of our leaders. Now I understand all these leaders are not Christians. I understand all these leaders are not saved. I'm just saying the positions of authority in general come from God. So that even when they do things we don't like, we can still have a good attitude toward them. We can still respond to them with respect. That is what you see Peter doing here. That is what you see the apostles doing. There is no disrespect in this. There is no anger or frustration in his tone. They responded in a courteous way.

I'm making a point of this. Because as you watch things unfold, right now, one thing you notice, (and it's really tragic) is a lot of Christians being very negative toward the government. They are being very spiteful toward their political leaders. And I don't mean they're disagreeing with them. I don't mean they have a different opinion. I mean, every time the subject comes up, every time the government comes up, every other word out of the mouth is a complaint or criticism. Every time the issue is raised, it is like a tongue lashing coming out of their mouth. Vitriol and bitterness, hateful speech, as if the government can't do anything right. As if they're all a bunch of idiots. And friends, if that is you this morning, you shouldn't be that way. God doesn't want that.

And furthermore, friends, people are scared right now, aren't they? People are upset and afraid. The world just feels like it is on edge right now. The last thing they need is a tongue lashing from you. The last thing the world

needs right now is an outburst. We need to give them hope. We need to give them good news and the gospel, which leads to another application to this passage, and that is that you need to show wisdom in this. You need to show discretion in how you relate to the government.

There is a time to defy the government; there is a time to disobey. You see that right here very clearly. But it is not every time. Your life should not be one consistent disobedient act toward the government. You need to show discretion; you need to pick and choose your battles. That's what you see in this passage. In Peter's case, they tell him not to speak a word about Jesus. Back in chapter 4, they command him not to teach in His name and Peter does it anyway, right? He tells him he's going to keep preaching about Christ and then he goes on and keeps preaching about Christ and doesn't stop. He disobeys. But when they tell him to come in for questioning, he comes. Later on, in chapter 5, the captain of the guard comes to get him without violence and without force. The implication here is that he comes; he submits. He had discretion in this. He didn't buck the system every chance he got. Peter didn't plant his flag on every single hill. Sometimes he gave in. Sometimes he complied. We should all do the same thing, as well.

This is important to talk about, because some people are wondering right now why are some churches meeting and some churches are not? And I don't just mean here in BC. I mean, all over the world, right? all over North America. Why are some churches having one response to the pandemic, and some churches having another response to the pandemic and the governing authorities? This is why. Because we're having discretion in this. We are having to make judgment calls. We are picking and choosing our battles like Peter did.

Listen, friends. The Bible gives us two commands in this. It gives us two principles that we've been talking about. It tells us that the church needs to meet; it needs to have a visible public presence in the community any way that it can. And then second, it tells us to submit to the governing authorities. The Bible tells us to obey the people that are in positions of power over us. And that is all that it says. That's all that it tells us. We don't have a bunch of separate verses that tell us how to deal with the coronavirus. We don't have an entire book called The Book of Second Pandemics that gives us all these details about how to handle a situation like this. It's not there, which means there is freedom in things like this. There is liberty in how the churches respond to these things. And we need to remember that and treat each other accordingly. We need to remember that as Christians, and treat each other with a note of respect, and generosity and patience.

Friends, I don't have to tell you, Christians can be so hateful toward each other in times like this, can't we? We can be so cruel and cannibalistic. We want to eat each other alive. We want to bite and devour each other. Call each other names and write angry letters and go around saying "you're wrong!" "No, you're wrong! You're in sin!" "No, you're in sin because you're not doing it like us."

Friends, you don't want to do that. You need to find a better way. We need to find a better way as the church at large. This is a hard time right now. I have been saying that a couple times this morning. These are challenging times, and in challenging times Christians, of all people, need to treat each other with love and grace.

In his book on conflict, Alexander Strauss said these words. He said the one thing Christians are not to do when engaged in conflict is to revert back to their old pre-conversion flesh-driven ways of behavior. He says no group of people should be as well equipped to handle conflict as Christians, because God has made peace with us so we can make peace with each other. Jesus has conquered the sinful passions within us. So, we can conquer the sinful

passions when we meet each other out in the world. And he is right, isn't he? We should be able to handle conflict in a different way from the rest of the world.

In my studies this week, I came across a story of a man named Mehran Nasser. You've probably never heard of this man before, but he made a name for himself several years ago by living for 11 years in the Paris International Airport. He stayed there for 11 years without leaving the territory because he had no home. His country denied him citizenship while he was in the air flying into Paris. So, when he landed, he had no place else to go but to stay in the airport. But an interesting thing happened in his life. When the French authorities finally issued him travel papers, he did the most unusual thing. He never left the airport. He stayed put until he was hospitalized and died. Because he had become comfortable there. He had become used to living in that place.

I think there is a lesson in there for us. There is a principle in there for us as Christians, and that is that some Christians have become so comfortable in the world that they don't want to leave. They don't want to give it up. Even though they are saved. Even though they belong to another kingdom. Now they want to go on living as if nothing ever happened to them, and friends, you don't want to do that today. You don't want to go on living as if nothing ever happened to you, especially when it comes to this issue.

People can be so emotional when it comes to this topic. Of all places where we should stand out as believers, of all places where the fruit of the Spirit and our new life in Christ should shine the most, it should be here on this topic. We need to live like we are different because you are different. Friends, you have been made new in the blood of Christ. So, will you act like that today? Will you take these words to heart?

Let me pray for us now that God would give us grace. To do this, let us close in a word of prayer.

Heavenly Father, we've talked about this extensive subject this morning, and we're just kind of scraping the tip of the iceberg here. There is so much more to say. Father, I pray that the most important thing that we would take away from this text, and from this whole discussion, is that simple point at the end there, that Christ has made us new. He has made us different. We've talked about these issues of the church and the state and the government; they should be all secondary to us. Because the most important thing in our lives now is You and what You have done through Jesus. You have forgiven us, You have saved us, You have made peace with us. And so, we should be able to go out and make peace with others. May that be the most important thing this morning. Father, we do pray for our government today. We do pray for the nation of Canada. We pray for our leaders here in the province who are making difficult decisions right now in light of the coronavirus. Lord, would you draw them to Christ? Would you save our governing officials? You can do that, Lord. You've done that before, You can do that again. And also, Lord, would you help us to know as a church how to respond to them? I pray for the churches right now. I pray for those who are meeting, those who are not meeting, those who are doing different things. Lord, if they are standing for Christ, and they're standing for scripture, help us to encourage them, to speak a word of hope to them during these difficult days.

As our church, Lord, here at Grace, would we be a church that is a city on a hill and light that is shining bright for Christ. And may Christ be glorified in that as we go out this morning, Lord. Would You be glorified in our day-to-day lives as we serve You at home, as we serve you in the workplace, and Christ be exalted in all things. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.