

Fear God, Honor the Emperor

1 Peter 2:13-17

Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter 2. Tonight, we deal with the sticky topic of the believer's response to government. We live in the most politically charged time of my life. There has been a glacial shift in our culture away from Christianity and the God of the Bible, and it has sorely affected our halls of government. The demand for Christians to become more involved in the political process has never been greater; to deny it is to claim that there's a facet of reality over which God ought not be sovereign. Dire as the times may be, however, they aren't as dire for us as they are for our brothers and sisters around the world. The coming reality for our country has been their reality for decades or longer. Some of them may be getting ready to gather for their weekly gathering in someone's basement in a few hours. What's encouraging about the passages we're about to look into is that they weren't written during a time of peace for Christian. Persecution under the tyrannical rule of Nero serves as the backdrop of Peter's inspired instruction, but before we get into it, I want to revisit the previous passage. Peter, as was his practice, connected his instruction for holy living to our identity in verse 11, saying...

1 Peter 2:11-12

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

These verses give us the overarching principle regarding holy living for God's glory and the salvation of those around us, and verse 13 now gives us practical application through the first of a string of "be-subject's" that we'll learn to apply through our study. Peter says...

1 Peter 2:13-17

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

"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution." Biblically, the TRIUNE GODHEAD established THREE INSTITUTIONS: the FAMILY in the Garden, the GOVERNMENT after the worldwide Flood, and the CHURCH at Pentecost. In this instance, the **"human institution"** refers to just that, the overarching institution of government, not necessarily any particular ruler or laws enacted by them. As we'll talk about at length in a moment, just because we find that rulers or laws enacted by them are wicked, it does not mean that we cannot still honor the God-ordained institution of government.

1 Peter 2:13-14

13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

Now, Peter's instructions tell us to BE SUBJECT. This passage is actually one of those wonderful, biblical NEON SIGNS that clearly tell us, "**This is the will of God.**" Therefore, being subject to governing authorities, even those that are unjust, is going to be the focus of our evening, but HOW DO WE DO THAT? Do Peter's words constitute a divine command to BLIND OBEDIENCE? Or are there times when CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IS THE ONLY RECOURSE FOR THE BELIEVER? AGAIN, let me say that I understand that Peter's focus here is SUBMISSION, and while I fully intend to keep that as the focus of tonight's discussion, SUCH QUESTIONS NATURALLY ARISE FROM THE TEXT. HOW TO WE HONOR, specifically, WICKED RULERS (Peter's focus in this section of his letter)? What do we do when they COMPEL us to DISOBEY GOD'S WORD? I have read a couple of commentators who have argued that to look into this side of Peter's instructions is to IGNORE HIS CORE PRECEPT and get into the weeds. They opt instead to leave this passage with the VAGUE APPLICATION to JUST SUBMIT. Again, I ask, "*How...do...we...do...THAT?*" Dr. Norman Geisler taught that there was as much to learn about a topic by looking at it from the NEGATIVE perspective as there was from the POSITIVE, what a thing IS NOT versus what it IS, what something DOES NOT MEAN versus what it DOES MEAN. I agree. Therefore, we are going to look at both sides, and in order to keep the FOCUS ON SEEKING TO HONOR AUTHORITY, I'm going to talk about that last.

So, when is civil disobedience called for, and what does our disobedience look like? Again, we aren't looking for a way to righteously disregard human rule. By considering what might eventually demand our disobedience, we're actually looking for the BOUNDARY within which we can confidently and joyously OBEY authority as service to God. With regard to civil disobedience, there are THREE BASIC POSITIONS. The first is ANARCHISM. Anarchism says that CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IS OKAY ANYTIME someone feels personally justified in it; there is ZERO BIBLICAL SUPPORT for this viewpoint, so we won't bother discussing it.

The second position on this topic is what some call RADICAL or EXTREME PATRIOTISM, which says that CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IS NEVER OKAY. Everyone must always submit to their government, no matter what the command, and some even put forth the very passage we're studying tonight as biblical support for this view. Indeed, there are many passages to consider, but no better starting point than the passage when civil rule or government was first instituted, immediately following the destruction of the WORLDWIDE FLOOD. As the LORD was giving His covenant to Noah, promising that He would never again destroy the earth with water and permitting Noah and his family to kill and eat animals, He went on to tell him...

Genesis 9:5-6

5 And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

Now, the EXTREME PATRIOT would say that because such rule was ORDAINED by God Himself, and because we find NO EXCEPTION CLAUSE, man is therefore OBLIGATED to submit to civil government (and as far as that argument goes, I AGREE). This instruction to submit to government on the basis of its divine ordinance is backed up with Paul's words in Romans...

Romans 13:1

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.

The argument follows that, not only has government been instituted by God, but also that a given authority figure would have never risen to power if it wasn't the will of God. Therefore, we are DOUBLY ACCOUNTABLE for submitting to governmental authority. Paul continues, saying...

Romans 13:2

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

This is the BASIS of the entire argument: "**whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.**" If you EVER disobey, you're in direct rebellion against the Lord. Paul continues...

Romans 13:3-4

3 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, 4 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.

This is how Peter described the role of government and rulers' responsibility to God, "**to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.**" Now, these passages absolutely teach us to honor and obey governmental authority, and if they were the only passage dealing with the topic, we might rightly come away with the understanding that the Bible teaches UNQUALIFIED obedience to the government. God did institute civil government, and He is the One who raises up the rulers in time, and for that reason, WE ARE TO HONOR AND OBEY THEM, but as we study the Scriptures as a whole our understanding of this topic becomes more nuanced. For instance, while it's true that God ordained government, He did not ordain its evil. This is sinner and sin stuff, you know? God loves the sinner while hating the sin. In the same way, God ordained government, but not the evil that governments commit.

We just read where Paul taught the Romans that governmental authorities are God's servant, approving of good and carrying out His wrath upon the wrongdoer. Peter said the same thing, describing "**the**

emperor as supreme," and "governors as sent by him TO PUNISH those who do EVIL and to PRAISE those who do GOOD." This is the description of a GOOD or JUST ruler. However, the Scriptures are replete with condemnation upon wicked rulers. In fact, much of the prophets' writings can be summed up with the words of Isaiah...

Isaiah 10:1

**Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
and the writers who keep writing oppression,**

Therefore, we see that God ordained government and even raises up its rulers, BUT He does not approve of their wickedness, which He knew would always be part of the equation because all the offices are filled with sinners. As such, our obedience to them is NOT UNQUALIFIED. As Dr. Norman Geisler put it...

"Blind obedience to the evils of government is not patriotic; it is idiotic."

So, the next question that arises is, WHEN ARE WE AS BELIEVERS JUSTIFIED TO DISOBEY THE GOVERNMENT? There are two viewpoints on that as well. One group holds that when a government PROMULGATES LAWS that are AGAINST GOD'S WORD, that government is not to be obeyed. This is sometimes referred to as the ANTIPROMULGATION POSITION. The other group believes that ONLY when a government seeks to COMPEL its subjects to COMMIT WICKED ACTS (in opposition to God's Word) is it to be disobeyed, also known as the ANTICOMPULSION POSITION. The distinctions between these two viewpoints can be seen here...

Two Views of WHEN to Disobey the Government	
Antipromulgation Position	Anticompulsion Position
When it PERMITS evil	When it COMMANDS evil
When it PROMULGATES evil laws	When it COMPELS evil actions
When it LIMITS freedom	When it NEGATES freedom
When it is POLITICALLY oppressive	When it is RELIGIOUSLY oppressive
CHRISTIAN ETHICS: Options and Issues, Norman L. Geisler	

As an example, when the government forbade the teaching of Creationism alongside Evolution, those holding the Antipromulgation Position would say that the government should not be obeyed. However, those holding the Anticompulsion Position would say that the government is NOT to be disobeyed because it has neither mandated that Christian teachers must believe or teach that Creation is untrue nor has it prohibited the teaching of Creation elsewhere.

Abortion is another example. Some would say that a government that PERMITS such evil should not be obeyed, while others understand that PERMITTING EVIL IS NOT THE SAME AS COMMANDING EVIL. Now, this is in no way a justification for the atrocity of abortion; I'm just pointing out that, though our

government allows it, they have yet to mandate it. We actually see a biblical precedent for such a mandate in Egypt in the days of Moses. When Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill every baby boy that was born, they disobeyed his command, lied to him about it, and God honored them with families of their own (Exodus 1).

During the conquest of the promised land, Rahab protected the Israelite spies, disobeying the king's command to turn them in. She also lied to the king, and God honored her efforts by sparing her family and giving her a place in the LINEAGE OF JESUS CHRIST (Joshua 2)!

When the wicked queen Jezebel began executing all the Lord's prophets, Obadiah hid 100 of them in a cave, providing food and water for them (1 Kings 18:3-4).

When King Nebuchadnezzar set up a golden image and commanded that it be worshiped, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused, and the Lord protected them in and brought them out of the fiery furnace into which they were thrown as punishment (Daniel 3).

Pastor Kevin talked about this on Sunday, but when political rivals of Daniel tricked the Persian King Darius into establishing a law that made it illegal for anyone to pray to anyone but him for 30 days, Daniel disobeyed, and God rescued him from the lions' den (Daniel 6).

When we jump forward to the New Testament, we not only see the disobedience to authority from Peter and John (and the rest of the apostles), but we also hear from their own mouths the clearest justification for it. When the Sanhedrin charged them not to preach or teach in Jesus' Name, we read...

Acts 4:19-20

19 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, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.

And then later, they state even more emphatically...

Acts 5:29b

We must obey God rather than men.

I know that was a bit of a whirlwind tour, but I hope you noticed THREE PARTS to each instance of divinely approved civil disobedience: (1) a ruler raised up by God had given a command that went against God's Word; (2) there was an act of disobedience to THAT command; and (3) through God's response to those who disobeyed or the way Scripture favorably records the scene, we see explicit or implicit APPROVAL of their refusal to obey. Something else we've seen through these BIBLICAL instances of civil disobedience is INSTRUCTION on HOW we're to disobey unjust, oppressive laws.

Two Views of HOW to Disobey the Government	
Revolt	Refuse
REVOLT against it violently	REFUSE TO OBEY it nonviolently

FIGHT it	FLEE it
REJECT its punishment	ACCEPT its punishment
CHRISTIAN ETHICS: Options and Issues, Norman L. Geisler	

Of these two positions, to which did our heroes of faith adhere? They merely REFUSED, and in the face of the consequent threat of punishment some fled (like Elijah and Obadiah fled from Jezebel), or else they accepted their punishment (as in the case of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Peter, and John. That may sound like a BLEAK predicament. It may sound like we're supposed to just do the right thing and potentially die for it.

...

Pretty much! It's what Jesus did, right? He lived a sinless life and still died a CRIMINAL, and He told His followers that we ought not expect anything different. The word "witness" in Scripture means *martyr*, not *revolutionary*. Now, thankfully, we still live in a country in which we can affect change through nonviolent, legal means (voting, running for office, supporting just legislation, and so on), and we should employ every means available for promoting God's will in this world. However, when the government commands that we step across the line that Scripture forbids, we must remember that we've been called to FOLLOW JESUS through the same SUFFERING HE SUFFERED, and if it comes to it, to a CROSS like his. If anyone knew something about this, it was Peter, the man who had put down the sword he swung in the garden and tells us in tonight's passage to be subject to the government and who left this world on an upside-down Roman cross.

WHY have I spent so much time on this notion of CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE? It's largely because the question that naturally arises from Peter's instruction to be subject is, "*What if the command of the government is wicked?*" and again I want to clearly establish that the Bible informs us as to WHEN we're to disobey and HOW, WHILE ALSO ENCOURAGING US TO CONFIDENTLY AND JOYOUSLY OBEY THE REST OF THE TIME as SERVICE TO GOD! Peter says...

1 Peter 2:15-16

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. 16 Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

This is a continuation of Peter's exhortation to "**Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation**" from verse 12. The common accusation was that these *Christians* were up to no good, and God through Peter was saying "*With your good works, PUT A MUZZLE ON THAT FOOLISHNESS!*" That's literally what the word translated "**silence**" means, to MUZZLE. You see, Christianity started with great controversy, and things hadn't changed. What was one of the insults/accusations against Jesus? That He spent His time with sinner and tax collectors, the DREGS of society. People looked at His

followers and just saw a bunch of untrained commoners. He even had an EXTREMIST in His ranks, Simon the Zealot! To the Romans, that guy was A TERRORIST! To outsiders looking in at those coming to Christ and making up the Church, “questionable” was a term that likely came to mind.

Later on, however, after the Church was birthed and had begun to spread across the empire, perhaps reports had spread about INCEST and PERVERSION that was apparently condoned in a church in Corinth. Such talk did nothing for the cause of Christ. Every time folks heard a bad report about a Christian, it was assumed that all Christians were exactly the same, kind of like today when a professed Christian gets caught up in a scandal; those in the media can hardly contain their GLEE because they want to see Christianity and the Church destroyed.

Again, Peter says, “PUT A MUZZLE ON IT! Shut down that kind of talk by showing the world how YOU HAVE BEEN CHANGED.” We’ve been set free to serve God, and one way we’re accountable to serving Him is by HONORING and OBEYING governmental leaders.

We’ve been set free from the systems of this world, from its values and priorities, its mad scramble and “rat race.” Though sin will always be something we’ll struggle with, we’ve even been given the grace and the power of God to resist temptation and the spiritual insight to see the cravings of this sinful world for the empty, destructive passions that they are. Nevertheless, WE’RE STILL PART OF THIS WORLD. As the series title suggests, we are SOJOURNERS, but even a sojourner traveling through a foreign kingdom is expected to submit to the laws of the land even (especially) if they go against personal preference; the laws don't change for those who are *“just a passin' through.”*

Peter says, “BE SUBJECT!” “LIVE FREE!” How is that supposed to work?! “SERVANTS OF GOD!” Once again, Peter tethers his teaching to our IDENTITY, and I promise that I’m not going to harp on this much tonight, but it is a RECURRING THEME throughout his letter. I hope you’ve begun to see that as you and I grasp WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST, IT CHANGES EVERYTHING! *“Yes, you've been set free. Yes, you're called to be subject, but understand, it's for the Lord's sake; you're doing it as servants to GOD.”*

Peter uses the familiar term *doulos*, the Greek term translated as servant or *bondservant*, to drive this point home. Many hear “bond” and think FORCE, but the term actually carries the meaning of FREEDOM. In the New Testament it’s used of *“one who gives himself up to another's will,”* the Lord’s, *“whose service is used by Christ in extending and advancing his cause among men.”* We see a picture of this in the Old Testament in Exodus 21 when a freed slave, out of love for his master, submitting to serving him for the rest of his days. It’s a life that says, *“It’s not about me, it’s all about HIM. It’s not about what I want, but about what He wants. It’s not about my rights, but about His GLORY.”*

1 Peter 2:16

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Our SELVES are the problem. When God calls us to something, it's our SELVES that finds a reason not to. It's what causes so many to struggle with authority in the first place. For many, if someone attempts to tell them something, it doesn't just rub them the wrong way, it gives them a bone-deep, full-body carpet burn! They look for any way out of honoring authority—we're good at coming up with excuses, i.e. deluding ourselves—which is why I got the part about the only excusable civil disobedience out of the way first thing. So many fail to understand that the Kingdom of God is all about authority—HIS authority, and anyone upon whom He's bestowed it. Every one of us was made for God, to know, love, and obey Him, yet many spend their lives attempting to skirt authority, and they wonder why they're miserable. They can't begin to fathom that slavery to God is the truest freedom there is, that the freedom to do whatever you want is actually just slavery to sin. God has broken the bonds that kept us enslaved to sin, freeing us, as Peter says, to serve God. Freedom is for serving.

Then in rapid-fire succession, Peter ends with a series of instructions that ascend higher and higher into the heavens before returning to earth to bring them to bear again on the topic at hand. He writes...

1 Peter 2:17

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

“Honor everyone.” Does this mean show honor for everything that everyone does? Certainly not. This is one more place in Scripture that teaches us to love the sinner apart from his or her sin, just as God showed His love for us (Romans 5:8). As such, we are to seek to find something in everyone to honor whether it's some commendable character trait such as their wit, work ethic, or courage, or perhaps for their position in the workplace (they may be a superior, or they may be a very helpful subordinate), or we may seek to honor them for their gray hair. Do you see how this would function to make inroads into their lives for the sake of the gospel?

“Love (agape) the brotherhood.” Peter takes it up a notch, and I love this. THE APOSTLE WHO COULDN'T ASCEND BEYOND “BROTHERLY LOVE” WHEN QUESTIONED BY JESUS NOW EXHORTS HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST TO “UNCONDITIONALLY LOVE” ONE ANOTHER; THIS IS THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT. We're to do more than simply show respect for one another within the Body of Christ. We're a special people, called out from the same darkness, purchased at the same extravagant cost, indwelt by the same Holy Spirit, commissioned to the same glorious purpose, and all headed to the same heavenly home where we'll rejoice and praise God together forever. As such, there's a kinship among us that knits us together unlike any bond conceivable in this world, even familial bonds.

WHAT DOES THIS LOVE LOOK LIKE? Well, as we see throughout the Scriptures, it's a love that DOES SOMETHING. Given the context of a PERSECUTED CHURCH struggling within the Roman Empire, under the rule of Nero, I feel that the love to which Peter exhorts us all looks a lot like what John described in his letter when he wrote...

1 John 3:16-18

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Next Peter soars to the heavens and commands us to **“Fear God.”** THIS IS THE IMPETUS behind it all. If we fear God, we’ll follow through on His commands. The word for **“fear”** is the Greek word *phobeo*, from which we get the word *phobia*. While I’m not necessarily advocating for being terrified of God, I’m slow to swap out that word with *reverence*, *respect*, or *showing piety*, though all of those definitions are accurate. There is a GRANDNESS that is part of this DEFERENCE or REVERENTIAL OBEDIENCE that comes from being struck with AWE over the REALITY of God so far as our finite minds can grasp it—His INCOMPREHENSIBLE VASTNESS and POWER and WISDOM and HOLINESS and RADIANCE and GLORY and LOVE! Such a realization arrests our hearts in the midst of halfhearted obedience, our minds in the midst of absent-minded prayers, raises us up to heavenly realms while on our faces in worship, makes us bold as lions in our convictions and in the face of opposition, and serene as eagles in the midst of life’s storms. This is a FEAR, or a RESPECT, or a REVERENCE that COMMANDS MY LIFE MORE than the fear of anything else, a FEAR that says, “I must live thus and so because GOD EXISTS and I’M HIS.”

Then bringing it back down to the earthly plane, Peter says, **“Honor the emperor.”** This is God’s will. He instituted government and ordained its leaders, and He’s glorified as we submit to it. As such, we OBEY the laws of government under God as His servants. **We PRAY for our leaders**, as Paul urged Timothy and the Ephesian church, saying...

1 Timothy 2:1-2

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t pray for our nation’s leaders as I should. I’m ashamed and convicted of that. As I was writing this, the thought crossed my mind, *“What would our country and our government look like if we prayed for it as much as we complained about it?”* Again, I’m convicted. We need to ask the Lord to convict our leaders, show them His kindness that leads us all to repentance, and save them. We need to ask the Lord to have mercy on us by GIVING THEM WISDOM to lead well, and I’m encouraged in this because the wisest king who ever lived wrote...

Proverbs 21:1

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

God established government, and our leaders are in His hands. May we commit to pray all the more fervently for them, our President, Vice President, Congress (in Washington and here in North Carolina), and anyone else who has a hand on the rudder of our nation.

Thankfully, because we live in a country that is still mostly free and in the hands of the people, we have more options than to either submit or refuse and die. When our government passes unbiblical or unjust laws, we can WORK WITHIN THE ESTABLISHED SYSTEM to change them legally and peacefully.

And then, as we've covered at length, ONLY when we're commanded to commit unbiblical, wicked acts do we REFUSE to obey, and as the threat of punishment arises, as unfathomable as it may seem, we continue subjecting ourselves to God's institution of government by not seeking to upend it, but like the prophets of old and the Christians of the first century, FLEEING oppressive government, or else patiently accepting and ENDURING PUNISHMENT.

Walking that line of obeying the government in every area, refusing to obey only when wickedness is mandated, and then patiently accepting the punishment for disobedience DISPLAYS UTMOST CONVICTIONS AND FAITH, and is a TESTIMONY that CANNOT BE IGNORED by an onlooking, lost world. ISN'T THAT THE POINT? We're servants of God. This isn't for us, but for the LORD'S sake and for the sake of the slanderous lost who are watching, in order that **"they may see [our] good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12b).**

This is the laid-down life, the living sacrifice, and possibly the ultimate sacrifice. I don't pretend that any of this is easy, or that I even have a full grasp of it. I stand on the Scriptures and ask the Spirit to grow me, but YOU KNOW WHAT?! I'm reminded that the One who calls us to this life of sacrifice HAS ALREADY DONE IT! Jesus, the Pioneer and perfecter of our faith submitted Himself not only to the Father's plan of redemption through the cross, but He did so by submitting to the human authorities (corrupt though they were) who judged and executed Him as a criminal, and He now sits in glory. The writer of Hebrews encourages us...

Hebrews 12:3

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

And as we continue looking to Him and walking in step with Him, we'll find the wisdom and grace that He has for us in such times, enabling us to FEAR GOD and HONOR THE EMPEROR, in that order, come what may.