



**1 Peter 2:11-17**

**Free to Serve**

**October 24, 2021**

Let's start by reading our passage today:

**1 Peter 2:11-17** “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.

**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.”

Peter has been writing to the churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire. He is writing to teach them, and by extension, us how to live in response to the gospel in a world that isn't our home yet.

So Peter opened the letter by calling his readers “elect exiles,” people who were chosen by God but out of place in the world. Again in chapter 1 verse 17, Peter calls the lives of Christians here a time of exile. And in today's passage, for the third time, Peter calls us sojourners and exiles. So this must be an important theme.

Peter wants us to change the way we view ourselves in the world around us.

And this is important because, for those of us who have lived in the US all of our lives, we probably can't remember a time when Christianity was thought of more poorly by the broader culture. Christianity was at least somewhat respected in most circles in our culture, the church was thought of as a force for good (even though everyone has always known there are hypocritical exceptions) until very recently.

But today it is common for our neighbors to see Christianity as a force for evil in culture. And this is a new situation we find ourselves in. Some of that change in perception is understandable, as abuse scandals and coverups have shown the world that there is a lot of evil done in the name of Christianity and it took the advent of social media for it to finally begin to be known and rooted out.

But alongside that overdue and needed exposure, there has also been such a huge shift in society's ethics and morals, and Christian morality is now seen as evil, specifically when it comes to issues of sexuality and gender. Christians are thought of as evil people who believe things that would be bad for society, particularly because Christians can't sign off of new views on gender, sexuality, and marriage. So Christians are often thought of as holding evil views.

And then on top of that, there is a constant wave of false accusations. Social media has allowed people to finally shed light on truth, but also allows false accusers to slander and deride Christians. I was at a pastor's meeting a few weeks ago in Louisville, and in one of the breakouts we went around the table with the lead pastors there, and every one of them claims to have been slandered on social media in the last year.

White this is new to us, but it isn't rare around the world for Christians to be thought little of, and it isn't a new phenomenon in history.

The people that Peter wrote to in his letter were living in an Empire that was increasingly seeing Christians as evil and damaging to the Empire. Christians were called "atheists" for refusing to worship the roman gods, they were accused of cannibalism, they were accused of treason for undermining the empire. They were slandered, misunderstood, sometimes deliberately. They were mistreated by a brutal government that opposed them.

And I don't think it's that bad for us here, the Roman Christians would have loved to have the life we live and what we call persecution. But we do need to know how to live in a world that is hostile to the Jesus we hold so dear.

How do we live in a world that in large part rejects our faith? On a campus where the faith is mocked? At school where there might only be a couple of other Christians? At work where there's a different religion practiced? Maybe even at home where your family doesn't believe? Or under a government that is not for the faith? These are the issues we'll look at just in the next couple of weeks in 1 Peter..

**1 Peter 2:11**“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

This is so important to start off with. He says “you are sojourners and exiles here,” and it’s important to, first and foremost, abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.

Christians living in a world that seems to be against them can very easily come to believe that the primary battle we need to fight is against the world out there. We can aim a lot of rage at “them,” at “those people.” We can come to believe that my biggest problem is my pagan neighbors, my oppressive government, my being surrounded by people who have a completely different world-view than I have.

But Peter says that the biggest war being waged against our souls comes from within, from the passions of the flesh.

And “the flesh” in the new testament is not just our bodies, he isn’t only saying out war is against our body’s appetites or calling us specifically to abstain from sexual sins (those are included but not at all the only fleshly sins.) The flesh is our old nature. The old person that we were before coming to Christ. And we are still haunted by it, we are still tempted by it, we still desire the sins of the old way.

Galatians 5 lists some of them, just so we can see that the “flesh” is a broad category:

**Galatians 5:19-21** “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

So fleshly desires are not just what we would think of as the desires of the body, but the desires of the old way of life, including envy and stirring up division and strife and jealousy. The flesh is our nature, our normal way of living apart from Christ.

And Peter says, “Those are waging war against your soul. You might think your biggest enemy is the culture around you, your neighbors, or your government. But the biggest enemy of the Christian is always within.”

As hard as things might be out there, what's in here is always worse and more damaging.

My biggest enemy is me. My biggest problem is me. The biggest threats to my soul are the passions of my flesh, not my culture's corrupt values, and not the government.

We can get very angry at the problems we see out there, and we can fight with a huge passion for causes against opponents. But it is so easy to convince ourselves that we are the good people and they are the bad people, and if we win the war against them that we have won.

If we think that our biggest problem is our culture or our government or our neighbors or even the lies so many are believing, we are missing what Peter says here. Our biggest battle is always against our own sin.

And it's important to have this mindset - and this is not the mindset promoted on talk radio or in the news media, so the voices we hear all day long are usually not saying this. They keep telling us that our biggest battle is against them, and it's easy to believe that and just be mad at the world around us.

Or, if we believe they're the biggest problem, we will come across as arrogant elitists when we interact with our culture. They'll be able to sense if we think, "you are the bad guys, I'm the good guy, and my biggest problem is you." It's hard to share the love and mercy of God with people that we have come to believe are worse than us.

When we talk about the problems Christians face and the problems the church should address, it's so important that we start where Peter starts this section, by calling us to wage war against our own sin first and foremost. What's in here is always more of a threat than what's out there.

I have known people who, rightly, worked incredibly hard to protect their kids from the lies of our culture and from the sins of the world around us. But then at home, they have been angry, and bitter, and punching holes through walls with their rage, anxious, and fearful, but then believing that the biggest enemy to their souls and their kids souls is out there. And the kids aren't protected at all then.

But the biggest enemy to my soul is always me, the biggest enemy to my kids souls is in my household. Living as exiles and strangers here doesn't mean that I see the biggest problem as being out there.

Verse 12:

**1 Peter 2:12 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.**

So next, Peter tells us that we have to keep our way of life honorable in the eyes of the world around us, even when they call us evildoers.

He'll say the same thing in a few verses in verse 15:

**1 Peter 2:15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.**

If we want our neighbors to glorify God, if we want to silence the false things they say about us, we will do so with honorable conduct and by doing good.

Sometimes we think you have to fight their rage with our own rage, their slander with our own slander. We think that maybe we can silence them by shouting louder than them. They're jerks on facebook, and we can outdo them so that finally they will tap out under our rage and glorify God. We see ourselves as Tom Cruise in a Few Good Men, and expect that at some dramatic moment we will scream loud enough "You can't handle the truth," and they'll repent of their sins and trust the Lord and stop saying bad things about us.

*"We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." - Madeleine L'Engle*

Peter says the way we silence slander is with good deeds.

Now he isn't offering us a false hope, that we can just be nice to people and they'll stop right away. He says that they will continue to speak against us, but they will see our good deeds.

And if they don't turn from their sin now, and they may not, there is coming (verse 12) the day of visitation, the day that the Lord returns. They will see Him face to face, and then on that day they will give God glory for that good work done in our lives.

We may win over some opponents with good works in this life, we may silence some critics in this life by doing good to them. But the sure promise is that if we don't win the argument in this life, on judgment day, truth will come out. And our aim in life is not to glorify ourselves and be thought of as "right" now - our aim is to glorify the Lord.

We want any opponents we have to know that we truly do good to them. That may infuriate them for now, they may say even that is insincere. But on that day when they can't hide what's in their hearts anymore and everything is laid bare before the Lord, we want them to say "God, you left a witness to your truth in my life in these Christians. You offered your kindness through these people."

We are here to be a witness to the love and kindness of God, to glorify the Lord.

People who are living to one day see Jesus don't have to win all the arguments now. But we are called to glorify God with honorable conduct now, trusting that He will sort it out.

But that can't be our approach to really bad people, people who persecute Christians, people who do evil to us? Scripture does go that far. Listen to Romans 12:

**Romans 12:14-21 "14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

Jesus said something similar in Luke 6

**Luke 6:28 "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."**

We do good even to people who are against us. Even to enemies. He's not just saying to not do bad things to them, he is saying to actively pray for them and do good for them. We're called here not only to keep ourselves from retaliating, but to retaliate with good. With a blessing.

This is only possible if we're living with the Gospel of Jesus that Peter keeps reminding us of front and center. If I've believed the Gospel, that I was a wicked sinner rescued by Christ, then I can't see their sins as worse than mine. And just as I've received a blessing when I deserved a curse, I can pass on to them a blessing when they deserve a curse.

I have to believe the gospel that says that the only reason I'm a Christian is because God sent His son to die for me (I didn't achieve anything to become a Christian, it wasn't my morality that got me in.)

And though I received Jesus, it's only because God supernaturally opened my eyes to the beauty of Christ and gave me the gift of faith.

I have to believe **Ephesians 2:8-9** **"8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

I didn't become a Christian because of something good in me. Then I'd have something to boast about, some reason to feel superior to those who don't believe. But I don't have that.

Which enables me to bless my enemies.

And this command drives us to utter dependence on Jesus.

We naturally love it when our enemies fall. You're driving down the road, and some maniac passes you at a hundred miles an hour, almost crashes in to you. You come around the corner a few minutes later and he is in the ditch. The first thing that comes to mind is not, "That's too bad." It's "serves you right. You got what was coming to you. HA!"

What kind of person weeps when an enemy falls? And celebrates when an enemy prospers? Only the kind that is constantly living with the Gospel front and center.

Jesus was always so perfectly loving that even when he was being nailed to a cross, he was praying for the forgiveness of his enemies. This is the God we worship, and as we do, we are made more like Him. So this is a call to rejoice with those rejoicing and weep with those weeping, even when they're enemies. To desire our enemy's good.

We are called to live lives where we speak Gospel truth and relentlessly do good to a world that doesn't do good to us.

But we have to ask if that's our normal approach to the world around us.

I think that, often, our approach to the world around us is almost for us to have two different personalities.

*There's an SNL sketch from the 90s with Will Ferrell called "Get off the shed." And in that sketch, Will Ferrell is cooking out in the back yard and has some new neighbors come over. They're standing by the grill, and his conversation with the neighbors is over-the-top friendly and nice. And then he looks up and sees his kids (off camera) on the shed, and starts by nicely asking them to get off the shed, then getting back to his conversation about golf clubs with the neighbors. Then he looks up at the kids again and starts to get more angry - yelling "get off the shed," then going back to the conversation. Each time he looks up, he gets louder and angrier and more profane, screaming at them to get off the shed, but breaking back into cordial conversation. At the end he's screaming and yelling and threatening a beating, and the neighbors are appalled.*

*And I can't help but think that that looks like the Christian approach to the world around us. We welcome people into church where we're super nice to them, we try to have them over for dinner where we're incredibly nice and kind, and we even do good works for neighbors. But then we get on twitter. And there we yell and scream and threaten beatings. Believing that maybe our anger, our snark, our mockery will change people, or at least shut them up.*

But (2:12) **"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."**

It's not that we don't speak or make a case, it isn't that we disengage from the world, but it's by doing good in the face of evil that God gets the glory.

But isn't this naive? It's a brutal world, and we think that by behaving honorably in all circumstances it will go well for us? It's dog eat dog out there.

Well, not to get ahead of ourselves, but at the end of this section Peter will write this:

**1 Peter 2:22-24 “22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”**

Let's not forget how Jesus changed the world. He didn't return mockery for mockery. He didn't threaten anybody, even when he was suffering totally unjustly. He accepted wounds, he gave his life, and as Christians, we've all been healed by Him. We might think we accomplish nothing by being kind in the face of insults, but Jesus was, and He accomplished quite a lot.

And in the next three sections, Peter is going to unpack how we do good in some specific contexts: in institutions like government, at work (even under unjust bosses), and at home. He's going to apply this principle of relentlessly doing good in a world that's against us.

And today's passage talks about doing good in institutions like government - so let's read the rest of this passage again:

**1 Peter 2:13-16 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.”**

So what is God calling us to here? How does the person who has been impacted by the gospel relate to the governments of the world and live in a world where we don't run things?

**1) We are respectful of and subject to human institutions (1 Peter 2:13)**

He says in verse 13 to be subject for the Lord's sake to every institution. Literally every "creation" of man.

This will certainly cause Christians to stand out in our day. In our culture, we see flaws and sins in our institutions and we tear them down, without building something in their place. (It's very easy to destroy, very hard to build - but in our day building seems to matter less than making our mark).

We lose a job and we ruin the reputation of our old company on social media. We disrespect the schools we graduated from. We don't just try to improve and right wrongs of past generations, we are iconoclastic and we destroy institutions. We say they are all suspect, they are all formed by unjust power dynamics, they all have sin. So we destroy.

And we do that with government as well.

And Christians might be extra tempted to disrespect government authorities because, as Peter said, we aren't citizens here first and foremost. This isn't our home. So our attitude might be "I can do whatever I want, I don't have to listen to authorities."

But Peter says to be subject to them.

So as Christians, we are called to submit to even deficient governments, because God has put them there.

So our default posture toward the authorities is that we submit, we comply, we obey, even when the people in office are scum, even when the taxes seem wasted, even if we think the government is illegitimate, even when we disagree with their decisions.

Peter wants Christians in the Roman world to be good Roman citizens, and for us to be good citizens as well. People who are subject to the authorities and even serve them.

Jesus said:

**Matthew 5:41 "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."**

Under Persia and then later under Rome, government officials who were carrying official messages (carrying the government mail), could force an able-bodied man to carry that post for a mile. And the Jews didn't like the Roman occupiers, their presence there was unjust and unwelcome. But Jesus didn't say, "Fight back against Rome when they ask you to carry the mail." He said, "Carry it twice as far as they ask you."

Christians aren't people who are by default quarrelsome with their government, they aren't scofflaws, they aren't anarchists, they aren't subversives.<sup>1</sup> Some Christians would have viewed submission to the state as incompatible with the lordship of Christ or their freedom in Christ, but Christ and Paul and Peter alike said, "Not only can you submit to the authorities, you should - you owe it (Romans 13) and they deserve it (1 Peter 2)."

So we want to be respectful of authorities, we want to be thankful for them (imagine the world without them), and to be eager to gladly submit to them (because God put them there and, after all, they do have weapons and the call to punish those who do evil (2:14).

But that's not all Peter says. Jumping around a bit...

Peter says in verse 17 to "fear God, honor the emperor."

## **2) We fear God and only honor the government (1 Peter 2:17, 2:13).**

Fear is a higher form of respect than honor is.

This means that our subjection to the government is real, but does have a limit.

And this is very important, especially when we're dealing with a number of categories of authority and submission in coming weeks: we don't give absolute, unquestioning submission to any human leader. We are never called to submit to anyone but God in every situation. There are exceptions.

We don't submit in all things to the government, workers don't submit in all things to bosses, wives don't submit in all things to husbands - absolute submission belongs only to God. We fear God, but honor the other authorities.

Peter says to submit to the institution of government, honor the emperor who has legitimate human authority. But do it for the Lord's sake (13). Which means that if the

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, 340

Lord's commands clash with the government's commands, we fearlessly submit to the Lord and disobey the command to sin.

### **3) We recognize the rightful role of human government (2:13,14)**

In verse 13, he says we honor the Emperor as supreme - there is a supreme human governmental authority rightly given by God to the emperor in this case. I'd argue that our emperor is the constitution.

Verse 14 says that governors are sent by Him (by God) to punish evil and praise good, so they have a legitimate authority. So we honor everyone (verse 17), recognizing that civil government was instituted by God for good.

He doesn't say human government is a necessary evil, but a God-ordained institution.

### **4) We give unique love to believers (2:17).**

Verse 17 says to love the brotherhood.

It seems he is talking about government but then throws in this "love Christians" command, which can seem out of place. But it is probably here because this is going to be needed in all kinds of ways in a difficult world. These people will need to love and care for each other when the government takes away their property. They will need to have each others' backs when they're being slandered and falsely accused.

And it may not get that bad in our lives, but we certainly need to care for one another and avoid the temptation to distance ourselves from Christians as Christianity is mocked. Love the brotherhood.

### **5) We live as free people who use our freedom to serve**

**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.**

Peter has called us to be subject to human institutions, but now he says to live as people who are free. So we have a unique relationship with government and with any other human institution. We are not the property of the government, we don't fear the

government. We are free. We don't submit because we have to because the government owns us, we submit to serve God.

No, the government doesn't have the claim over us that many human governments claim to have. But Jesus does, and he says to use our freedom to gladly submit as an act of service to God.

We look for ways to do good - to government and to our neighbor. In verse 15 he says to do good to silent their ignorant talk, and at least 6 more times in 1 Peter he tells us to do good, do good, do good.

When the Westminster catechism attempted to sum up all that is required of Christians in their demeanor toward their authorities, it said, "The honour which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defence, and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honour to them and to their government." (Q127)

There's a high calling on a Christian living in a fallen world. And we all know we've fallen short - we've been angry at our neighbors, had rebellious hearts toward authority, defamed institutions.

Our only hope is the Gospel.

Prayer of Confession - (Portions Derived from a prayer entitled "Honoring Parents" in Streams of Mercy, a prayer book by Barbara Duguid.)

Father, you alone are worthy of our reverence and fear and honor and praise. You deserve our lives because you've made us, and your will gives us life and gives us our purpose. We are yours. And you've given us countless opportunities to do good in our world, regardless of what we lack or how much pressure we are under.

You've also called us to, in freedom, submit to government. But we confess that we are prone to give way to rebellious, arrogant, and selfish hearts that dishonor those you've

commanded us to respect. Forgive us for our sin.

Thank you for the perfection of Jesus. Thank you that He honored you with flawless obedience and reverence. Thank you that he respected even those who disrespected Him. Cover us with his goodness and clothe us in His righteousness. Look at us and see His goodness.

Holy Spirit, deliver us from unloving, disrespectful hearts. Humble us. Help us to love and honor imperfect and even sinful authorities and to give thanks that authorities were given by God for our good. Help us never to sin in response to their commands, but make us people who go the extra mile to honor them and obey as much as possible.

### **Sermon Discussion Questions**

- 1) Peter urges us to avoid the “passions of the flesh.” Which passions of the flesh might be temptations when it comes to our relationship to institutions and government?**
- 2) Why does Peter place such a strong emphasis on Christians doing good?**
- 3) How do we submit to the government as free people?**

**4) Where do we draw the line? Which demands of the government must we disobey?**

**5) How do we show honor to government even when we must disobey?**

**6) Discuss this summary of our duties toward government in the Westminster**

**Catechism:** “The honour which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defence, and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honour to them and to their government.” (Q127)