



1 Peter 2:4-10

Relationship with the world and government

Summary: Peter calls us to live holy lives, even in difficult times and challenges us to submit to government leaders for God's glory.

Do you have to do what the government tells you, even if you disagree? That's the question we're going to tackle this morning. Which seems pretty relevant, doesn't it?

And yet it was also relevant 2000 years ago, halfway around the world when Peter was writing to early Christians in the days of the Roman Empire. They had been going through some hard times recently, Peter acknowledged that they have been grieved by various trials and so he wrote this letter to encourage them.

He reminds them to respond to difficult days by remembering all that God has done for them. He wants them to remember they are chosen by God, they are sanctified by the Spirit, they are saved by the blood of Christ, they have a living hope. And he wants them to think about these things, expecting that the truth will give them strength, courage, and comfort for the challenges they face.

And now we enter the section of the letter where Peter gives them instructions for how, *even when life is rough*, their Christian faith should work itself out in our various relationships. We'll look at the Christian's relationship with the government this week. Then next week we'll look at the Christian's relationship with their boss and what that has to do with Easter. And then we'll spend two weeks looking at the Christian's relationship with their spouse.

In each case, we'll see that Christians are called to submission, *but only because we've first submitted to Christ*. Our submission to any form of leadership on earth is derived from our submission to God in Heaven. And that is a very important fact, because it means submission is not an act of weakness or surrender, it's an act of worship offered to God. It begins and ends with submission to Him.

So watch where all this leads, and be prepared, there will be something I say this morning that you won't like. You won't like it, and I won't like it, but there are things that have to be said because they're rooted in Scripture.

We won't like it because there is something in each of us that doesn't want to submit to the government, it doesn't want to submit to God, it doesn't want to submit to anyone. There is something inside each of us that just wants to do whatever it wants to do.

Read with me:

1 Peter 2:11 Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, 12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by *your* good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Now, I want to keep pounding on this: who is Peter writing to? Christians. He's writing to the church, and specifically, he's writing to Christians going through difficult times, and yet this is his message: watch out for the war within.

Your number one concern is probably the things happening to you or things happening around you, the things you worry about happening, but Peter says you're actually fighting on two fronts. And, he says, if you do well with the inner fight, it will make a difference in the outer fight.

So, what is this inner fight? He says we must **abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul**. And notice how passionate he is about it – **Beloved**, he says, **I beg you**, or Dear Friends I urge you. Obviously, this is important stuff.

But what is he talking about? Well, for many of us when we think of **fleshly lusts** we immediately think of things that are sensual and sexual. And that is true, we should avoid that. But it's actually much more than that.

You may remember in our study of Galatians Paul spoke about the works of the flesh vs the fruit of the Spirit. His list of fleshly behavior included **sexual immorality, impurity, and sensuality**, but it also mentioned **hatred, contentions, jealousies, fits of anger, rivalries, selfish ambitions, envy, drunkenness, revelries, and "things like these"** (Gal 5:19-21), which is a pretty big category.

These are all things arise from within us and war against our souls.

And that's something else worth noting here – take note of the fact that there are desires that spring up within you, hormones that surge through you, ideas, dreams, suggestions, or images that enter your mind, that are not godly, that are not good. There are things that happen *in your own heart and mind* that cannot and should not be trusted. There's an enemy *in you*. And this has massive implications that are playing out in our increasingly permissive culture today.

We live in an age where people will tell you that if you have a desire to do something, you ought to do it. You're told not to suppress yourself; you're told to explore yourself, explore your desires, explore the possibilities. Be true to yourself.

That's a new message. And it can be dangerous. What if you are encouraged to explore something that takes you down a road and later you decide you were wrong about it, or your interests and desires change, now is it possible for you to go back to where you were before? Not always. Decisions have consequences and they can't all be undone. Or you might make it back, but you maybe affected forever by what you did.

The truth is, there are certain desires that come up from within that should be repressed, rebuked, there are things we should not indulge, entertain, or give in to. And maybe you need help dealing with them – there’s nothing wrong with that – ask for help. But don’t assume that just because you have a desire, an interest, or a feeling that it is right. God wants you to know there are desires, strong desires *that you will feel inside* that are actually at war with your soul.

Pay attention to that language, it’s intentionally strong – they **war against the soul**.

And you should **abstain from** them. Keep away from them. Starve them for attention. The old Puritan pastor John Owen famously said, “be killing sin or it will be killing you.” He asked, “Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

Christian, take note: there are things *in you* that war against your soul, and if you are going to join God in the fight against them, it will feel like actual war at times. Hear that. See that Scripture says that. Ask other Christians of their experience and the saints will tell you it is true. Do not be surprised that it feels like war at times in your heart and mind and soul – it is!

God is calling you to a different life, a life filled with honorable conduct and good works.

Eph 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount

Matt 5:16 “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your **good works** and glorify your Father in heaven.

And do you know what good works are going to feel like sometimes? Work. And war. Because, you’re going to choose to do good to others, choose to walk in the Spirit and not the flesh, you’re going to choose good works and honorable conduct over fleshly lusts that war against your soul.

So far we’ve just talked about the internal aspects of all that. We still have to get to the external aspects.

This transformed way of life we’re called to will unfold in the sight of people who don’t know or love our God. They’re supposed to be able to see you and the differences in your life. That might make them say bad things about you, but they shouldn’t be able to deny the fact that there is something different, something good about you and they should be able to tell it’s because of the God you worship.

Which means, we must be able to live among our family, coworkers, and neighbors while we fight this internal war. We're not called to live isolated behind the walls of a monastery or convent. God wants us here, in the middle of people who don't know Him, or reject Him, living lives that are different because of Him.

Our God is a missionary God and His number one way of reaching people is through people. For all the emphasis Christianity has placed on stadium-based crusades, tract distribution, and other large scale evangelistic events, most people are still brought to Christ through the witness and testimony of someone they know. Someone they've spoken to. Someone whose life they've seen. Maybe someone whose good works and honorable conduct they've observed, even in the difficult seasons of life.

It's not easy being different. It's not easy standing out. It's not easy being the one who can't go, or won't go where everyone else is going. But don't grow weary in doing good. Keep fighting the war, keep being a witness, it is bringing glory to God and it just might be bringing souls to Him as well.

OK, I said all of that to introduce the general concept, that God is calling us to live differently, to live lives submitted to His instruction and glory instead of our own selfish desires. Now comes the really hard part, we begin to apply the general principle to specific circumstances, specific people, or kinds of people that should be able to see the difference in your life and we begin with the government.

1 Peter 2:13 *Therefore* (notice the linkage here – everything he's about to say is in light of what he's already said, all of that, and now therefore, this: Therefore) *submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— 16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.*

Let's start here by noticing that government has two God-given roles: to punish evil and to praise good. This doesn't always happen, or it doesn't always happen well, but these are the responsibilities God has given government.

Now, the application here is obviously for political government, but it's government at all levels, notice he mentions both the king or emperor as the head of government, but also governors at the next level down and so we can imagine this extending in modern terms all the way down to city councils and other officials. But I think we can apply the same concept to those in any capacity of leadership – their role, in basic terms, is to promote what is good and punish what is evil.

So I want to encourage those of you who serve in government, but also in any position of influence to ask: how am I doing on this? How is my team, branch, division, or organization doing on this? Are we promoting good and punishing evil? You can think in terms big and

small, but ask God to help you see things this way. And then think and pray about how can you do it better?

One of the key principles of leadership is that you tend to get more of the kind of behavior you reward. So whose good work can you promote and encourage? Can you write some a note, put someone in for an award? What are the tools at your disposal that can be used to praise people for doing good? And can you do it often?

Ask God to help you see fruit instead of faults and then praise them. If you get a government paycheck, you need to make a note about this and really, seriously, spend some time thinking and praying: who can you praise for doing good and when, where, and how can you oppose evil? God says that's the major part of your job in government.

Well, not all of us work for government – though we can still apply the same principles in other leadership positions – but one thing we all do have is a government over us. And sometimes, we see things differently.

Sometimes we disagree on what is evil and should be punished and what is good and should be praised. And sometimes, because government is full of normal human beings, it makes selfish choices that have a negative effect on the people being governed. What do we do then? Do I have to do what the government says? And what are my rights or loyalties as a Christian?

Well, let me work out a nuanced answer to the question.

First, when the government, or any form of leadership in your life, makes a decision you don't agree with, step back, detach for a moment and ask yourself: is the goal still to protect or help someone? You might not agree with how they're doing it, or who they're helping, or what they're stopping, but can you see that the end goal was to try to do something good or stop something bad and can you at least sympathize with that?

Now that's not always the case, but sometimes, it is. Leadership is difficult and the larger and more diverse the group, the more difficult it is to please everyone, sometimes there is no win-win outcome that satisfies all parties, but a decision has to be made. That means the government will make decisions you don't like at times, but can you at least affirm what they were trying to do? Look for the good that may come out of the decision or action and rest in that.

OK, but what if you really disagree, or what if what the government does or requires is flat out wrong? Sometimes the government makes unholy or Biblically evil or sinful decisions. What then?

Well, this is where it is important for you to understand the context of this letter, something we keep coming back to. Remember, Peter is writing to Christians who lived in the Roman Empire, and Nero was on the throne at this time. He was an infamous tyrant, excessive and indulgent and depraved. He took the throne at 17 and at 22, he had his own

mother killed for being an over-involved mom and historical sources outside of the Bible tell us of his personal cruelty, especially to Christians. History has almost nothing good to say about him, but this is man ruling the Empire when Peter this letter.

We tend to think differently about government because we're so used to living in a representative democracy, but this was written to Christians living in an authoritarian state under an emperor who was worshipped and could whimsically decide on matters of life and death.

And, still today, if you go to China and pick up a Chinese Bible, you'll read this same verse written in Chinese. If you go to Iran and find a Persian Bible, you'll find this same verse written in Farsi. If you go to Cuba you'll read it in Spanish, go to Russian you'll read it in Russian. This verse says the exact same thing to all Christians, at all times, living in all places, under all forms of government. And if it says it to all of them, and it says to Peter's original audience, we need to be very, very slow and thoughtful before we explain it all away because we don't like what the government has done in our situation.

Notice that it really seems like Peter is coming down hard on the side of submitting to authority. He says, **submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors.**

That's comprehensive language. That's not wishy-washy. And it's direct, to the point. It's not hard to understand what he's saying. In fact, it's the clarity of the command that makes us ask: well, what about this situation or what if that happens?

And, so, we have to see something else here. We're called to submit to the government. And that's a word we don't like. Submission feels unAmerican, unmasculine, it feels like something for wimps, chumps, losers, and the weak. And it's made even worse in our current age of exalted individualism. We live in an age that is supremely concerned about our "rights." We are far more focused on what we can get and on what we are owed than on how we might need to submit.

But I want you to notice something crucial here, one little piece of information that changes everything else. We are called to submit, to every ordinance, even under authoritarian regimes, **for the Lord's sake.**

This is essential. You have to see this, because we're going to keep coming back to it when we look at submitting to our bosses, submitting to our spouses, and even submission in the church in chapter 5. When Christians are called to submit to any human individual or institution, it is always a derivative submission of defiant faith.

We submit to individuals and institutions on earth for the sake of our Father in Heaven. I can submit to the king on earth because I'm obeying King Jesus in heaven. So, my act of submission to you is actually an act of worship to Him, an expression of my defiant faith. I don't agree with you, I don't agree with what you're doing, but by faith, I submit to you and worship my true King, trusting that He sees and He knows and that He is in control.

But that's not easy to do, is it? If we are honest, we need to confront the fact that we are far more likely to give ourselves a pass than we are to submit to this teaching. And I'm telling you, there is a time and place for civil disobedience. But there's a lot more times and a lot more places for Scriptural obedience, which requires your submission to **every ordinance of man**, even ungodly men, because that's the situation this first applied to.

And that's why Peter reminds them, do all of this **as sojourners and pilgrims** – remember this world is not your home. This kingdom is not forever. But God's kingdom is. And there, every law and ordinance are just, and you still struggle to submit to those!

You see, the main reason submission to things and people we disagree with is so hard, is because *I* disagree with them. No matter how righteous my cause, I often get my personal motives and feelings about an issue bound up in it and that always causes a mess.

So Peter says,

15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— 16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.

So, before you decide to resist the government on some issue, you have to ask: are you doing good or are you using liberty as a cloak for vice?

Let me get real personal here for a minute and talk to you about masks. The government says you have to wear them. I don't want to. But my resistance to the government has nothing to do with religious liberty, or Christian doctrine. It has nothing to do with the science of wearing masks - I'm not an epidemiologist or public health specialist. I just don't like wearing one and I really, really, don't like being told that I have to – that's the root of the issue for me, I don't like being told I have to do this, in all these different places, no matter how I feel physically and no matter what I think personally. I just have to submit.

So, if I'm honest, my resistance to the government's mandate is all rooted in my refusal to submit the desires of my flesh to anything I don't like. And I'll look for any justification I can find to do what I want.

Now that's me in my fallen flesh, that's my daily struggle, maybe you're different but the fact is, this principal of submission applies to us all and there has to be some place in your life where you feel the pinch and pain of submission and yet you continue to choose it, you continue to choose to do something you do not want to do, as an act of worship, because it's derivative submission and you're ultimately a bondservant of God. You can submit to this for the sake of pleasing the One who rules and reigns over all.

OK, now having said all of that, is there ever a time when it is prudent or even necessary to defy the government? Well, the same Peter who wrote this was once arrested and told that a condition of his release was that he no longer preach anything about Jesus. And in Acts 4

he told the leaders of his nation – “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” Peter makes the classic defense, if obeying government means disobeying God then I must defy government for God’s sake.

In the book of Daniel you have two clear examples. Daniel is thrown into the lion’s den because he violated a law prohibiting prayer to anyone but the king. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego face a similar fate for refusing to bow before a statue of the political ruler, and when they’re brought before him to answer for themselves, they say: our God is able to save us from execution in the fiery furnace, but even if he doesn’t know this, we will not bow before you O king.

Or what about that famous group of rebels we see every Christmas? The wise men come seeking Jesus and stop and ask Herod, the governor, where the King of the Jews is to be born – Herod’s men tell them, “in Bethlehem” and they go looking for the child. But Herod also tells them, let me know if you find him – that’s a pretty direct order from the king, and yet, the Scriptures say, being warned in a dream, they departed another way – in other words, they slipped out of town without ever reporting back to Herod.

What do all these examples have in common? They were about honoring God, not personal preference. It wasn’t civil disobedience for the sake of my rights or my views, or my party, it was for the glory of God. Which goes to show: there is a way to submit, for the glory of God, and a way to resist, for the glory of God, but in both cases, it’s all about Him and not about me.

And so, Peter sums it all up like this:

17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

We are called to live in God pleasing relationships with everyone – inside the church and out in the community – those with position and standing, as well as your peers and those with no position at all – honor, love, and respect them all out of your love for Christ.

Life is filled with difficulties, there are challenging seasons we all must go through and challenging individuals that are placed in our path. The key to facing it all is to face up to myself, to the fleshly lusts that war against my soul. And as I fight and resist them with honorable conduct and good works I’ll be prepared for every other relationship as well.

It will not be easy, but it’s all derivative submission propelled by defiant faith – I do it because of my relationship with God and with belligerent hope in all that He has done for me and promised to me.

Let’s pray.