

A PEOPLE FOR THE WORLD

1 Peter 2:13-17

November 30, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

In the section we begin to look at this morning, Peter takes up the issue of how believers are to relate to non-Christian figures of authority. Those to whom the letter is addressed were living in the midst of one of the most oppressive of governments, the Roman Empire. They struggled as to whether to totally withdraw from all contact with the state or whether to accommodate to the demands of the empire. Peter will later deal with how Christians are to live distinctively in the workplace (2:18-25) and in the home (3:1-7), but he begins by considering this issue of the relationship between these Christians and the state's rulers. In this passage we see Peter encourage them to engage and work with the governing authorities with clear limits and occasions when the Christian must disobey.

There are four things we note in our text: 1) A general call for submission, 2) A particular call for submission to government, 3) The purpose of submission, and 4) Imperatives for submission.

I. A General Call for Submission (2:13a)

I recall an instance in one of my seminary classes where a discussion concerning "submission" became rather heated. One of the female students took issue with Paul's words concerning a wife submitting to her husband. Her contention was that Paul's words were written to a patriarchal society where the woman did not have the place she holds in today's world. Her belief was that in our society the woman has been liberated and Paul's words no longer mean anything in a world where all had been set right. While I hesitated to offer any words of wisdom in the heat of the argument, she suddenly looked at me and asked what I thought. I graciously told her that what I thought was not important, but what God has said. Having established what I knew she truly believed concerning the authority of Scripture, I suggested that her argument was not with the class, but with God, who never changes and whose Word is as relevant today as it was when it was written. I also suggested that her views on male/female relations were not accurate as she was looking at things through the lens of Western civilization. I reminded her that things today remain just as they were in Paul's time in many parts of the world. I then asked a series of questions in hopes of diffusing her noticeable animosity.

Her disagreement concerning "submission" is held by many today. It is based upon a faulty understanding of submission as it relates to equality. Many think that for one to submit to another, that somehow makes them the lesser in a relationship. However, that was not Paul's intent in Ephesians 5, nor is it Peter's in our text this morning. All human beings are created equal, bearing the image of God. When we speak of biblical submission, it does not concern our equality as humans, regardless of the relationship, but of roles within those particular relationships. The greatest illustration we have is that of the Godhead, where Scripture plainly teaches the roles that each Person has within that great unity. Jesus the Son submits to His Father's will in total obedience and the Holy Spirit submits to both the will of the Father and of the Son. We do not believe that the Son is lesser in being than the Father, or that the Holy Spirit is lesser than the Father and the Son. They are equal in essence in the Godhead, but submit in their particular roles.

It is vital that we understand this as we begin to look at a series of relationships that the believer has in the world. God has established certain authorities that we are to obey on this earth: government, family, workplace, church, etc. all have people called by God that hold places of authority that in God's wisdom serve to help sinful people function in a way that brings honor and glory to the Creator. If these authorities were not in place, the world would be total chaos having within itself the seed of its own destruction. But God in His grace and mercy, in His good providence, has provided order through these established authorities.

Here Peter introduces the verb **“submit,”** which is a key word we will see over the next few weeks. The verb itself can be translated “be subject” or “submit yourselves.” The word basically means “to place under; to subordinate,” and in these passages is a synonym to the verb *to obey*. Simon Kistemaker rightly suggests, “The implication is not that a person who submits to authority loses his dignity, but that he recognizes authority that God has instituted.”¹ Peter's command to **“submit yourselves”** has a sense of urgency. To fail to heed this command would lead to destruction.

Given in this light, **“Submit yourselves”** is something that the believer should do joyfully. It is not a call to drudging obedience but a willing opportunity to faithfully serve the Lord. That is in fact Peter's thought in calling the believer to submit **“for the Lord's sake.”** God is sovereign in every area of life and in full control of every situation to fulfill His purposes in the world. As one obeys those whom the Lord has established as authorities they demonstrate their reverence and submission to Him. So Peter grounds the entire call for submission in the Lord. We are created for His sake; we are saved for His sake; we serve Him for His sake; and we submit for His sake. This truth undergirds Peter's teaching on submission in all of these relationships he sets forth. The moment we try to analyze things from our perspective, pride gets its tentacles around our hearts and minds and we immediately, like my fellow student, begin to question God's fairness. But when we look at “submission” from the perspective of God's sovereignty and fulfilling His purposes in the world, and understand that if left to ourselves the world would implode, then submission should be something that we cherish as we reflect the glory of God in a fallen world.

II. A Particular Call for Submission to Government (2:13b-14)

With this understanding of submission, Peter sets forth the first of these worldly relationships, the believers submission to government. He says that we are to submit **“to every human institution.”** In some ways this is an unfortunate translation from the Greek, which literally reads, “to every human creature,” referring to human beings or creation. Tom Schreiner points out that no basis exists for defining it as “human institutions.” The translation **“human institution”** is given to help guard against the thought that Peter is saying that the believer is to submit to every human being. And that is in fact true. Peter does not suggest that the Christian is to submit to every person on earth as an authority established by God. So the translation **“human institution”** helps to guard against such a thought and in context is a valid interpretation. However, it loses some of the force that Peter is suggesting. Again, Schreiner suggests that when Peter gave the exhortation, he reflected only upon governing authorities, not every single person, designating **“whether to a king as one in authority, or to governors as sent by him.”** Yet we must also explain the reason why these authorities are called human creatures. Schreiner interpretation is revealing:

¹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *NTC: 1 Peter*, 98.

The reason is not hard to seek. The emperor cult was popular in Asia Minor, and Christians doubtless felt social pressure to participate. Peter reminded his readers at the outset that rulers are merely creatures, created by God and existing under his lordship. A fine balance is maintained, however, in that believers still have a responsibility to submit to these authorities. Their submission, however, is not mindless... They obey the injunctions of governing authorities ultimately because of their reverence for and submission to the Lord. We have an implication here that the ruling powers should be resisted if commands were issued that violated the Lord's will. It is impossible to imagine that one would obey commands that contravened God's dictates "for the Lord's sake."²

So we see from this that a proper interpretation is that these governing authorities are part of God's plan and purpose for this earth. They hold positions of responsibility under His supreme authority. An illustration of this truth is given from the lips of Jesus Himself as He stood before Pilate. In John 19:10-11 we read,¹⁰ "So Pilate said to Him, 'You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?' "¹¹ Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin.'" Notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say that Pilate had no authority, but the authority He had came from God. And Jesus submitted to Pilate, even unto death.

Do you see how submitting to ruling authorities, even wicked authorities, serves God purposes? Jesus was treated more unfairly than any human ever will be treated. And yet He submitted. Of course, He knew the purpose. Often we do not. But we are commanded to submit to those whom God has placed over us in government regardless of whether we know the end or not, the only exception being that to submit would lead us to disobey God.

Of course, we do not have kings or emperors or governors like they did in the Roman Empire. But the principle is the same regardless of what form of government we live under on this earth. Whether it be a democratic republic, communist rule, or rabid authoritarianism, the believer is to joyfully obey the dictates of those in authority.

So the teaching of the Bible is clear. God is a God of order. Authorities are ordained by God and people must obey those in authority over them (even if they are wicked men), but only as long as God's higher law is not being broken. Is this difficult at times? Yes, especially when our ruling authorities allow such things as abortion and homosexuality. Of course, we have a system that allows us to voice our opinions against such things at the ballot box. We are not to condone such sinful practices but we must take great care that we voice our opposition in a way that is obedient. Christians in America are called to do so, keeping in mind the purposes of God in submitting, especially when it is difficult to do so.

III. The Purpose of Submission (2:15-16)

"**For**" introduces the reason or purpose for Peter's command to submit to governing authorities. It is causal. Having established the ultimate motive for obedience being "**for the Lord's sake**," Peter gives the earthly purposes that would be served by submitting. The command to obey has an impact both on these rulers, who in this case were in opposition to them, as well as an impact on them personally.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *NAC: 1,2 Peter, Jude*, 128.

First, Peter shows the impact that submission would have on who he calls **“foolish men”** with a particular emphasis on **“the will of God.”** Peter straightforwardly suggests that obedience to the authorities is God’s will. In other words, to disobey this command to submit would be to disobey God. However, when one obeys God in this regard, it has a positive effect on society and these rulers. Peter says that as the believer does what is right, **“right”** being obedience to God in this manner, these **“foolish men”** might be silenced in their injustice and unfairness towards them. By submitting to government, Christians demonstrate that they believe in God’s ordained establishment and that they are good citizens, not anarchists. While they might still be accused unfairly, the accusations would make **“foolish men”** look all the more foolish. **“Foolish”** is not a slight on the intellectual capacities of such men, but of their moral slackness. They are **“foolish men”** because they do not fear God and walk in His ways (Prov. 1:7).

Again, Peter is not suggesting that the Christian is to obey at all times in all things. There are times, though I would suggest infrequent, when one must say as Peter himself did in Acts 5:29, **“We must obey God rather than men.”** However, we must take great care to analyze our motives before making such a bold assertion. Indeed we will see in chapter 3 that the believer may suffer greatly for obeying. But even intense suffering is not a reason to disobey. Daniel and his friends, Paul, Peter, Jesus Christ and many more accepted their punishment, even though it was unjust at the hands of foolish men, in obedience to God’s will. So Peter says that we are to submit for the sake of the Lord and in doing so we might minimize the slanderous attacks.

Paul put it this way, interestingly just prior to his treatise on government we read earlier:

Romans 12:18-21 – ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, **“Vengeance is mine, I will repay,”** says the Lord. ²⁰ But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Again we notice the importance of being good and doing good from both Paul and Peter. Our moral actions in obedience to God have an effect on those around us, even **“foolish men.”**

There is a second purpose for submission to ruling authorities that Peter gives in v. 16 as it pertains to the individual. Peter was not only concerned with the outward actions of believers that might affect others, but also their motive in doing so. In three phrases Peter shows how the believer is to submit. First, they are to submit **“as free men.”** This is an acknowledgement of their spiritual status, one which denotes their inner nature as redeemed by the precious blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19). This freedom would be quickly recognized by these in the early church as an important part of their faith.

John 8:36 – So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Romans 6:17-18 – ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

These believers had been reminded by Peter himself that with this freedom came a new home, a new inheritance, that they were merely strangers and pilgrims on this earth.

But with this freedom, Peter says, comes responsibility. Lest this freedom be misinterpreted or misused, Peter writes, **“do not use your freedom as a covering for evil.”** They must not use their freedom as an excuse to indulge in wickedness. Schreiner notes, **“Genuine freedom**

liberates believers to do what is good. Those who use freedom as license for evil reveal that they are not truly free since a life of wickedness is the very definition of slavery. Christians should never respond to the dictates of government slavishly, but they should obey out of strength and because of their freedom.”³

The third phrase dealing with how the individual is to submit relative to this freedom is “**as bondslaves of God.**” Again, Peter reminds them that they do not enjoy unrestricted freedom. One Puritan author titled one of his sermons, “The True Bounds of Christian Freedom,” dealing with the extremes of license and legalism in the Christian life. The freedom the believer has in Christ does not give them license to live however they please. True liberty means that there is freedom to do what is right, in this case, obey governing authorities. “**As bondslaves of God**” designates a wonderful title for the believer who has been set free from the bondage of sin and delivered over to a new slavery as servants of God. What Peter suggests is that only those who are slaves of God are truly free, free to do only what is right. Believers are called to live under God’s lordship, obeying the government as God’s servants.

IV. Imperatives for Submission (2:17)

This section closes with four general commands that serve as Peter’s application regarding submission. I say general commands because these verses are difficult to interpret, not as to the meaning but as to the context. Some try to force the context, interpreting the first phrase as “honor all rulers.” But while fitting the context, this is too limiting. The word *pantas* in the Greek nearly always is translated “people” and never “rulers.” Others interpret the first phrase as the initial urgent duty with the other three elaborating it. But the command to “**fear God**” does not fit under “**all people.**” So how are we to interpret this in context? I see this verse as four distinct commands that conclude Peter’s opening general call to submission. Schreiner concludes the same, stating, “I conclude... that all four imperatives are generalizations that apply to one’s entire life.”⁴ Therefore, we might call these commands, “The Scope of Christian Well-Doing.”⁵

First, then, the phrase “**honor all people**” means that we are to respect everyone. Believers are to treat every person with dignity since all human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). The very basis for the Christian upholding the sanctity of human life is captured in honoring all people. Even unbelievers are to be given this respect. This can be difficult for one who has been in Christ for a time. The consciousness of their own dignity can easily betray them into a depreciation of others.⁶ This is why James warned concerning the tongue in James 3:9-10,⁹ “With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.” Peter then offers this command to balance or temper the command to “**submit.**” As we noted earlier, one of the points of contention with those who see injustice in submission base it upon a faulty understanding that this makes them lesser of a human being. No, Peter here reminds us that all are equal as God’s creatures. We are to “**honor all people**” as God’s creation, but we are not to submit to all people. Again, submission refers to roles within particular relationships.

³ Schreiner, 131.

⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁵ D. Edmund Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 170.

⁶ Ibid., 171.

“Love the brotherhood” shows a special relationship between fellow believers. They are truly a family. The corporateness and unity of the body is captured by the term **“brotherhood.”** The Christians love is not to be restricted to a few people in the church that are like them, but to the whole body.

“Fear God” and **“honor the king”** serve as a fitting conclusion to this section, derived from Proverbs 24:21. If we were to take this verse alone, out of context and apart from the whole counsel of God, it would seem that Peter is teaching an order of submission: First, honor all men, then love the brotherhood, followed by fearing God and honoring kings. However, 1 Peter alone does not warrant this. Peter began his letter with the fear of God rooted in the gospel, followed by the Christian’s love for one another, then their relations to those outside the church. The Scriptures maintain this order. All that we do should be first to God, then to the brethren, then to others. Only then do we demonstrate love for God and love for others.