*The Believer’s Relationship to the Government*

1 Peter 2:13-17

1/29/23

Today we transition into the second major section of 1 Peter. 1:13-2:12 gave us foundational principles on holy living while we sojourn on the earth. 2:13-5:11 applies these principles to specific relationships and life scenarios. The first relationship addressed is our relationship with the government. This makes sense because Peter’s original audience was suffering persecution intense enough for him to call it a fiery ordeal. Such open and pointed persecution necessitates at a minimum governmental tolerance, if not governmental sanction.

The Roman government at that time was corrupt and self-seeking. The emperor was considered divine, and universal recognition of his deity was demanded across the empire. The man holding that office at the time in question was Nero, who is considered today as the most wicked and cruel of Rome’s emperors. He would order the execution of both Peter and Paul within a few years of this letter’s writing. In this context, it is easy to understand why Christians would struggle with the government. Sin, corruption, and cruelty were their trademarks. Christians were already suffering at their hands, and within a few years Rome’s full fury would be unleashed on them. This is the context for both Peter and Paul’s instructions.

Our text for today, along with the parallel passage in Romans 13, are both built around the command to submit to the government. But before we can understand what this means, we need to know God’s purpose for the government. I want to make three observations under this heading. First, governing authorities are ordained by God, meaning governmental structure is God’s idea, not men’s idea. Romans 13 says rulers are *established by God* and *ordain[ed] by God.* Civil authority reflects God’s character. God is a God of order. For order to be maintained, leaders must possess and exercise authority. This is true of the angels in heaven. Michael is an archangel, which is a position of authority. 1 Peter 5 talks about the leadership structure in the church. So it ought not surprise us that God establishes leadership structures for the ordering of society. Paul even goes so far as to call governing authorities *ministers of God for our good* (Ro. 13:4)*.*

Second, and closely related to the first point, is that those who hold civil office possess authority from God. Romans 13 says that there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are established by God. Those who resist authority have opposed the ordinance of God. Daniel 2:21 tells us that it is God who raises up kings and pulls them down. So the authority of the civil government is received from God. That is true when a good ruler is in power; but it is equally true when a wicked ruler is in power.

Third, the authority of the government is limited. God has not granted the government universal power. Rather, He limits the sphere in which they are to function. Both Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 teach that the purpose of civil authority is the ordering of society. More specifically, they possess the power of the sword so that they may punish evildoers and reward those who do what is right. Government exists to promote good behavior and to discipline wickedness. The sword in Romans 13 refers to capital punishment, which the Bible consistently advocates for. A government that abuses capital punishment or neglects it has lost sight of what justice is and the responsibility that God has given to them in maintaining order in society.

The challenge that rulers face is the desire to wield their God-given authority outside of the sphere God has ordained. We just experienced two years of the government trying to order every area of our lives. It is right for us to consider if that is the proper use of their God-ordained authority. There are two areas that governments regularly seek to exercise authority outside the sphere that God has granted to them: in the home, particularly in child-raising, and in the church. God has not given them that authority. He has entrusted authority to parents in general and fathers particularly at home; and in the church that authority is invested in the congregation as a whole and in biblically qualified church leaders in particular. Yet, because of mankind’s penchant towards sin, we tend to stretch authority beyond the bounds of what God intends. At times this is true of the government; at times it is true of the church; and at times it is true of parents. Sin makes the proper use of authority challenging, no matter where it is being exercised.

Much more could be said on the role of government than I have stated. But this provides sufficient background for us to consider the instructions of our text. While Romans 13 is more helpful in understanding God’s purpose for the government, 1 Peter 2 gives more attention to our response to them. Yet both texts are clear that should submit to governing authorities.

The season of governmental mandates we just went through revealed, in my humble opinion, that many Christians have a faulty view of submission. For some, submission is another word for compliance. For others, they feel that governmental overreach justifies an insubordination. I would suggest that both of these are faulty views of submission. Submission is an attitude, not an action. It is possible to comply with rules while not submitting to those in power; and it is possible to submit to the government while disobeying them in a particular area.

This raises the question then of what is biblical submission? It involves two things. First, it starts by recognizing that an individual or entity has a legitimate claim to authority in your life. As we have already seen, God has granted governments authority. Second, recognizing their legitimate claim to authority, we willfully bring ourselves under it. That is what submission is: willfully bringing yourself under the authority of another. As we will see in the weeks ahead, this applies not only to the government, but to servants with their masters, wives with their husbands, and church members with the church leadership. Submission is an important concept we must understand because all of us have authorities in our lives we must submit to.

Submission, or willfully bringing yourself under a legitimate authority, is the grid through which our responses to the government must be determined. There is never a time when we stop submitting to the government, even though there may be times when we disobey them. This is why we must know the scope of authority God has granted the government. They do not have universal power. There are times when submission to God requires disobedience to governing authorities. The easiest time to determine when this must be done is when they require us to violate the Word of God. The Jewish rulers commanding Peter and John to stop preaching Christ in Acts 4, or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, or Daniel’s refusal to stop praying are biblical examples of God-honoring civil disobedience. Yet there are grey areas less easy to figure out what to do in, like when the government mandates that you put something in your body that you do not want. Do they have the authority to mandate that or not?

I am not going to answer that question this morning, because that is a grey area where we need to leave room for people’s consciences to function. We must exercise charity and grace towards one another when earnest Christians come to differing convictions. But what I do want to make clear is that feeling compelled to disobey a civil command does not nullify God’s command to submit to the governing authorities He has placed in your life. Even disobedience must be done in a submissive way. Daniel and his friends model what this looks like in Daniel 1, 3, & 6. So yes, there may be times when your conscience will not allow you to comply with a governmental order; but I cannot find a time when the Bible says that believers should set aside the demeanor of submission towards the government. This is a truth American Evangelicals need to reflect on in our current political climate. I am deeply concerned by the celebration and legislation of evil in our country; but that does not give me the license to be insubordinate towards or disrespectful of the rulers God has appointed for us.

Third, let us consider why submission matters. I am going to blow through most of the text here in very short order. You can do your own homework on the text. But the text gives us three reasons why submitting to governing authorities matters.

First, it honors God. Romans 13 tells us that when we resist authority, we oppose ordinance of God. When we refuse to bring ourselves under the authority of the government, ultimately, we are kicking against the authority of God. We ought not do that. Rather, *submit yourself for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.* We submit to human institutions, not because they deserve it, but because we want to submit to God. When we think about it in this way, our attitude towards the government becomes a window into our heart’s disposition towards God.

I understand that there are limitations of people’s ability to rule well. Peter recognizes it in the text. The Roman emperor claimed to be a god, and his rule was said to be divine. Yet Peter calls his administration a *human institution.* In other words, Peter says Nero is just a man. Because all men, including those who are redeemed, continue to struggle with sin, there are times when governing authorities will not rule well. This does not negate the command to submit. Peter is telling his readers that God raised Nero up to be emperor and they ought to submit to him *for the Lord’s sake.* I am guessing most of us wish the political climate in our State and in our Nation was different. It is easy for us to feel justified in having a rebellious heart or critical spirit against our government. Yet while Peter was living under the rule of one of the most wicked men to ever walk this earth, the Spirit compelled him to tell us to submit to such rulers *for the Lord’s sake.* When we do so, we are ultimately submitting, not to them, but to God.

Second, submitting to rulers and authorities is a testimony to God’s goodness. Look at vs. 15. Submission *is God’s will*, which reinforces what we just said. As we do what is right, we silence the ignorance of foolish men. This restates the principle we looked at last week. Excellent behavior in the face of slander will cause some, as they witness our good deeds, to glorify God. It is the same concept here. Our actions and attitudes should point people to the goodness of God. When we display His love, offer His grace, grant mercy, show compassion, do justice, or do anything else that reflects His character, it points people to the Rock who is higher than us. Holy lives do two things. They expose the wickedness of sin, or as Peter puts it here: *it silences the ignorance of foolish men.* Foolish people seek to malign righteous men, but their accusations fall on deaf ears when the righteous maintain their faith. Secondly, holy living points people to God, giving us a platform to share our faith because people want to know the why and how of our excellent behavior. Again, I commend to you the life of Daniel as an example of what this looks like in the face of a wicked culture.

Finally, we submit to governing authorities as a demonstration of our freedom in Christ. Here the gospel turns the logic of the world on its head. Our culture views submission as oppression and inferiority. Yet Peter says that our freedom in Christ is the basis of our submission. Look at vs. 16: *act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God.* Here Peter does something really cool. He reminds us that we are no longer citizens of the world. We are a chosen race, a royal people, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession. The demands of this world have lost their grip on us. We are free; yet that does not free us from honoring God in our ongoing relationships in the world. We do not submit to governing authorities because they have a claim on us. We submit because we are in submission to God. He is the one who asks us to be submissive to rulers and authorities. We do not use our freedom in Christ as an excuse to disobey the government; rather, this freedom causes us to be good citizens. The gospel is what frees us to truly seek the good of the nation in which we sojourn, for it is only the gospel that can define what is good. So we are free to submit to those who have no hold on us because we have willfully submitted our lives as *bondslaves to God.*  Jesus showed us what this kind of submission looks in Luke 2, when He remained in subjection to Mary and Joseph. He willfully kept Himself under their authority even though He was none other than God Himself!

Finally, vs. 17 brings a conclusion to our text. I must admit that I was initially perplexed by this verse because it seemed disjointed from the rest of the paragraph. Here we are focusing on our relationship to the government, when Peter suddenly tells us *honor all people, love the brethren, fear God, honor the king.* Why does Peter suddenly expand our view from our attitude towards the government to include all people? He is giving us an important principle and priority that governs most of this second section of the letter.

This verse is a chiasmus, which was a common Hebrew literary structure. A chiasmus is a four-line statement in which the first and last statements are related to one another, while the second and third statements are also related to one another. The middle two are the real emphasis. So the verse calls us to honor all people and to honor the king. Everyone, whether a king or a commoner, rich or poor, powerful or obsolete, deserves honor. All people are made in the image of God; although sin has effaced that image, everyone, regardless of how strong a grip Satan has in their lives or how much they have given themselves over to sin, deserves honor as a fellow image-bearer of God. Thus the homeless person unconscious in the gutter is no less deserving of our respect and attention than the highest ruler in our nation.

Yet nestled between these two calls to honor people are two exhortations focused on our relationship with God and His people. We are to love our fellow believers, and we are to fear God. Although we honor everyone, we exert the majority of our relational efforts into our relationship with God and His people. We revere God as the all-powerful being that He is. It is because of who He is that we respond to those around us in the way we do.

The dominate focus in Ch. 3-5 will be on our relationships with God’s people; yet that does not nullify us from important relationships in this world. So, at the end of this text that is focused on the government, Peter gives us an important principle for all our relationships. Keep your behavior excellent in the world and show proper honor to everyone; but give yourself to the relationships that really matter…God and His people.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.*