



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER
**PROCLAIMING GOD’S EXCELLENCIES
IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

1 Peter 2:13-17

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

Introduction - The Paradox of Our Public Witness: Courage and Submission

Christians are to be courageous. We are to be bold in our witness for Jesus Christ. “The righteous are bold as a lion” (Prov. 28:1). We are not to cower in the face of public opposition to the cause of Christ; we are not to be bashful about the fact that we belong to another Lord and another Master. Instead, we’re to be like those earliest Christians, who in the face of public opposition said courageously: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Yet Christians are also to be submissive. Romans 13:1 says: “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.” And our text for today begins with this basic point: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” (2:13). As Christians we are to live lives in submission to those in authority over us. We’re not to be insubordinate, meddlers, rabble-rousers.

Of course, boldness and courage in the public square is difficult; it’s easier to shrink in silence than to say something others won’t like. But submission isn’t very easy for us as Christians either, is it? We don’t tend to like submission, and we don’t seem to be particularly good at being subject to every human institution.

Why Do We Find Submission So Difficult?

Why do we find submission so difficult? Why is it easier to act arrogantly toward authority than with gentleness and respect? Why is it so tempting to speak ill of our leaders yet very hard to bless them? Why is it so tempting to find ways to avoid fulfilling our obligations to authorities rather than cheerfully render what is their due? Why does it often feel much more satisfying to criticize politicians or mock policeman or tell jokes about school teachers than pray for them?

First, because human beings and human institutions are fallen and thus corrupt. Original sin has taken its toll on the whole of the created order. Everything is marked by the stain of sin and rebellion, both individuals and institutions. Let's not forget that it was Adam and Eve's son, Cain, who upon committing the first homicide in human history, went and built the first human institution, the first city. Therefore, governments make lousy laws that can ignore or even invert justice, rather than uphold it. And this makes submission for those who love justice at times very difficult.

Second, because we continue to wage war against the passions of the flesh. Remember, the passions of the flesh are not merely lust or greed, but pride and insubordination. Thus, at the core of who we are as fallen creatures, we find not only unruly appetites, but rebellion. We are rebels and have an almost instinctual aversion to authority. Our sinful human hearts chafe under authority, and we quite naturally resist submission. Therefore, we find it difficult to be subject to others. It hurts our pride, it wounds our vanity; it emasculates our sense of self.

But there is a third reason why we find submission difficult, and it takes us closer to the heart of today's passage. *We struggle with submission because we fail to see God as central to submission.* In our fallen condition, we're constantly tempted to live as if God were peripheral. And we live in a world in which God is constantly made to seem peripheral. But submission to authority is impossible, when God is peripheral.

Yet, as this passage reminds us, submission *is* possible when God is central; central in our lives and seen to be central in the world in which we live. This passage thus issues this provocative call to "be subject to every human institution" because God is central to the call to submission. And I want us to see this; to see how God is at the center of submission, so that we can embody the call of this passage.

We need to realize that submission is ultimately all about God: our view of God, our relationship to God, our obedience to God, our identity in God, our fear of God. And that the Christian's submission is not ultimately for the sake of human institutions, but for the sake of proclaiming the excellencies of God whom we seek to serve.

There are five ways in which God is central in the call to submission in this passage; there are five ways in which the call to "be subject" is enabled by God being at the center of this passage. I want to look at each of this briefly in turn.

First, be subject because this is the will of God (v. 15).

This is the first and most obvious and non-negotiable reason for submission: *this is the will of God.* We often wonder what the will of God is for our lives. I've found in my own ministry this is a frequent topic of discussion with others. People are hungry to know what God's will for their life is. Young people and students especially want to know what God's will for their life is.

We can be sure of at least this much about the will of God: he desires you to be submissive to those in authority over you. Notice the flow of thought in the first three verses:

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people (2:13-15).

Submission is the will of God for the lives of his people. God desires that we be subject to every human institution; and not just institutions, but individuals who are in authority over us as well; whether this is the President of the United States or the President of the Village of Oak Park; whether this is our State Senator or your child's school principal; whether this is the policeman who stops you for speeding or the librarian who fines you for returning your book too late.

But don't miss the fact that the submission God desires also has a design. A posture of submission, coupled with doing good for the sake of others, is designed by God *to shut mouths*. Or, as Peter says, "to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (v. 15).

We know from experience, and from what Peter has already said in his letter, that when Christians live rightly in the world, they're often mistreated by the world. In particular, they're often spoken against as "evildoers" (v. 12). But Peter's point is that God wants to silence slander with exemplary Christian lives. And part of the life that silences slander, is a life of submission to every human institution.

Second, be subject as slaves of God (v. 16).

Submission to those in authority over us is a tough pill to swallow because we often think we're someone we're not, and we easily forget who we in fact are. In other words, my answer to the question of "Who am I?" will have an enormous impact on your ability to submit to authority.

Some of you will recall the name Timothy McVeigh. Until the events of September 11, 2001, he was responsible for the single deadliest act of terrorism on American soil. On April 15, 1995, he managed to blow up an office building in downtown Oklahoma City and take the lives of 168 people. He was convicted of eleven federal offenses, and then executed on June 11, 2001.

On the day of his death, as he was led to the executioner's chair, Timothy McVeigh handed the prison warden a handwritten copy of the poem, *Invictus*, which in Latin means "Unconquerable." It was to be read publically as his final statement:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Invictus is the poem a rebel world loves to recite. It is the song sinners love to sing. It is the national anthem of hell. Yet it's the song we were taught to sing from the day of our birth; and it's the one we still sing even as Christians, when we forget the reality of our new birth.

Have you ever noticed how natural it is for *Invictus* to well-up in our hearts when we're confronted by the need to submit to authority? As fallen creatures, we're addicted to autonomy; we love independence; we thrive on self-determination. And we can easily think, even as born again Christians, that we're the masters of our fate, the captain of our souls, when we're not.

No, not masters, or even captains, but slaves. That's who we are as Christians. We are slaves of God. God has bought us with a price, and we are now his. He owns us completely and entirely and definitively. We've got no rights; only infinite obligations to an Almighty God. We're to do his bidding; we are his slaves.

But precisely because we are slaves *of God*—we are no man's slave. Peter captures this profound paradox this way: "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (2:16). In his *Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther captured this same paradox this way: "A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything. A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all."¹

So, brother or sister in Christ, you are free—utterly free in Christ. "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). You owe submission to every human institution, then, not because you're someone's slave, but because you're God's slave. And your submission is ultimately an expression of your service to him. You pay taxes and honor traffic lights not because you're a slave of the state, but because you're a slave of God.

Third, be subject out of the fear for God (v. 17).

One of the chief ways in which human beings and human institutions win our submission is through fear. People in authority over us compel our submission with the threat of punishment. This is true whether it's the Sheriff who can threaten you with imprisonment or your principal who can threaten you with suspension. Fear of man, and what man can do to us, is often what motivates our submission to authority.

But the Christian's submission to authority should not ultimately flow out of the fear of man, but the fear of God. It was Jesus who said to his disciples: "do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Our submission to authority is ultimately not the result of fearing physical punishment—penalties, fines, imprisonment—it's ultimately the result of fearing the One who can destroy us forever.

Notice how Peter closes this passage with four short and pithy statements, four challenges to us that cover the whole range of our relationships in life: "Honor everyone. Love the

¹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), p. 50.

brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (2:17). Notice that submission to authority is here described in terms of honor; that’s what submission looks like: honor, respect, deference. And we are told, first, to honor everyone; but we’re also told to “honor the emperor,” those in authority over us. But do you see what’s at the heart of our honor and submission, and what makes it possible? It is ultimately the *fear of God*. The fear of God not only enables love to other Christians, but honor to non-Christians, to everyone, as well.

So, recognize that when you’re insubordinate toward others, it’s because there’s no fear of God before your eyes. The Psalmist has said: “Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes” (Ps. 36:1). Children, you’re insubordinate toward your parents, when there’s no fear of God before your eyes. Students, you’re insubordinate toward your teachers, when there’s no fear of God before your eyes. Employees, you’re insubordinate toward your boss, when there’s no fear of God before your eyes.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the Book of Proverbs tells us. It is also the motivation behind our submission to every human institution. Not the fear of man, but the fear of God.

Fourth, be subject for the glory of God (v. 13).

Just as we’re to be subject to every human institution, not out of the fear of man, but the fear of God, so too we’re to be subject to every human institution, not ultimately for the institution’s or the individual’s sake, but for the Lord’s sake. Why do we respect village ordinances or pay taxes? Not ultimately for the sake of the government, but for the sake of God.

Did you catch this in what Peter says? It’s there in the opening verse of our passage, but it’s easy to skip right over. “Be subject *for the Lord’s sake* to every human institution” (v. 13). For whose sake? The Lord’s sake. That is to say, we are to be subject to those in authority over us ultimately for the glory of God. Our subjection in society magnifies God’s greatness in the world.

When we are subject to the institutions and individuals over us, we say with our lives good things about God. When we submit, we say good things about God as the Creator of all that exists (4:13); we say good things about God as the Sovereign Lord over whatsoever comes to pass (Rom. 13:1-2); and we say good things about God as the Savior of all mankind (1 Tim. 2:4), whose promise of salvation liberates us from this “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), and will one day usher us into “a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13).

So, you see, then, why Peter’s call to “be subject” (v. 13) follows so closely on the heels of his statement that the mission of the church is to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9). Submission to authority is one of the church’s most visible and strategic ways of publically proclaiming the excellencies of God. It’s one of the basic ways in which we are to be a City on a Hill. And it is one of the ways in which God ultimately wins worshipers to himself through the witness of our lives.

Fifth, be subject by following in the footsteps of the Son of God (v. 21).

But not only does our submission to every human institution bring glory to God, it also magnifies the Son of God. Which leads to our fifth and final point: We are to be subject to every human institution *by following in the footsteps of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Of course, one of the ticklish things about the teaching of this passage is that it appears to *assume* that the human institutions over us are basically just and fair and honorable themselves. We see this to a certain extent in what Peter says in verse 14, where he lays out a principle of civic authority: government exists to punish evil and to praise good.

But, as we all know, governments and other human individuals and institutions don't always act along those lines. In fact, they sometimes can get things turned entirely upside-down, so that they begin to punish what is good, and praise what is evil. Peter himself was no naïve optimist, however. In fact, he's probably writing during the time of the Emperor Nero, who was responsible for initiating persecutions toward Christians and who would ultimately be responsible for Peter's own execution.

This is why when he calls for our submission to authority, Peter points us to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. He knows that submission isn't easy; indeed, he understands that submission may even be costly, so costly it could even cost a Christian his life. But, as he reminds us, "to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (2:21).

Today is Palm Sunday, a day when the church commemorates Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and the beginning of the final week of his earthly life. It is a day in the biblical story that is teeming with the profoundest irony and redemptive tragedy: there is King Jesus, the Creator of all things visible and invisible, riding on the back of a donkey; there is King Jesus, the Lord of all eternity, standing trial before a Roman governor named Pontius Pilate, sent by the Emperor to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good; there is King Jesus, very God of very God, begotten, not made, hanging from a wooden cross, an executioner's stake, with as much dignity and respect as Timothy McVeigh; there is King Jesus, crowned with a crown, not of gold, but of thorns, adorned not with rubies, but with droplets of his own precious blood.

Yet, brothers and sisters, there is Jesus, who, Peter tells us, "committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 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" (2:22-23). There is Jesus, our Savior and our King, the one who has blazed the trail before us with his suffering and shed blood; there is Jesus, in whose footsteps we too are called to walk the path of submission to every human institution, that the world might see in *us* the life of the crucified and risen King, the Savior of all mankind.

Conclusion – Submission in Practice

But what does this submission to every human institution look like in practice? *First, submission means acting with complete gentleness and respect toward all.* Paul urged young Titus to remind the church "to be submissive to rulers and authorities . . . to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people" (3:1-2). So, too, Peter says to those to whom he's writing that while, yes, they are to be bold in their public witness to Christ, they are to speak of the hope of the Gospel "with gentleness and respect" (3:15).

Second, submission means not speaking ill of those in authority over us. Many have written about the sad state of civility and public discourse in America. We can't seem to talk to each other about difficult issues without calling each other names. The disappointing thing is that Christians tend to be just like everyone else in this regard. In fact, we can sometimes be even worse because we believe we have a moral justification for our position and thus for expressing

our moral indignation and even outrage at the position of others. Yet Christians are to have sanctified tongues that bless rather than curse. We're not to slander (2:1); we're not to revile (2:23); we're to keep our tongues from evil (3:10).

Third, submission means fulfilling our responsibilities to those in authority. In the parallel passage in Romans 13, Paul says: "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed" (v. 7). Christians shouldn't therefore be those who shirk responsibility or look for ways to avoid fulfilling our obligations. This means being faithful in the little things like paying your taxes, getting a building permit when remodeling your basement or attic, registering your car, renewing your driver's license before it expires.

Fourth, submission means praying for people in positions of political authority. It's interesting that Scripture is filled with exhortations to pray but surprisingly lean on defining what we ought to pray for. Yet one of the things we're clearly told to pray for is for those who are in positions of political authority. "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Fifth, submission means being prepared to give an account for the hope that is in you. Submission is about honoring those in authority over us, as this passage calls us to do. But one of the ways we honor people is by being ready to explain to them the reason for our hope, not in them and what they are or aren't doing for us, but in God, who is ultimately in control of all things. As Peter says a little later on in his letter: "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

We are called to be subject to every human institution, and we do this ultimately for the Lord's sake, for his glory and honor and renown.

When misunderstood, we trust;
when dishonored, we exalt;
when reviled, we bless;
when mistreated, we bestow honor;
when punished, we rejoice;
when attacked, we pray for our attackers;
when hated, we never cease to love.

And may we do this with the hope that by proclaiming the excellencies of God in our glad submission, we may see others come to know and love this God whom we serve.

Amen.