

1 Peter 2:13-17

Introduction

Last week, Peter introduced the main body of his letter – which has to do with how we’re to live *in* this world and in relationship *to* this world *as* the sojourners and the foreigners that we are. So we saw last week that in spite of all our foreignness and all our lack of belonging, what we do have in common with this world is the basic knowledge of what is “good,” and even sometimes the practice and living out of what is “good.” And yet what is simply “good conduct” for the Gentiles is ultimately “holy conduct” for the people of God because our conduct is grounded not in the “wisdom” and philosophies of men, but in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the wisdom of God. We saw last week that even though there’s this key difference between good and holy conduct, there’s also a common ground, here, that gives us the basis for living *in*—and in relationship *to*—this world. So Peter writes in verses 11-12:

“Beloved, I urge you **as sojourners and foreigners** to abstain from the cravings of the flesh, which wage war against your soul, keeping your conduct among the Gentiles good, so that when they speak against you as *evildoers* [*kakopoiios*], they may see your good deeds and give glory to God on the day of visitation.”

So the question is: Will our lives and our conduct, rooted in the teachings of the Gospel, be a cause one day for the whole world to acknowledge God’s perfect justice and righteousness? We are called to live every day as it were in public before the eyes of the whole world, so that even when they still speak against us as evildoers, they’ll be compelled one day to acknowledge the truly “good” life that all of God’s children have lived.

So what are these “good”—*and holy!*—lives that we’re to live before the world? The answer can be summed up in one word, and it’s probably not at all a word we would have expected. That one word is *hypotasso*, “**submit yourselves**” – place yourselves under [authority]. It’s this one word that will stand as the heading for the next three sections of Peter’s letter: “**Submit yourselves to every human creature** (2:13)... servants, **submit yourselves to your master** (2:18)... wives, **submit yourselves to your husband** (3:1)...” So, beginning this morning in verse 13, Peter writes:

I. 1 Peter 2:13a — Submit yourselves to every human creature [in any position of authority over you]¹...

First of all, notice the word “**every**.” Peter’s going to give three examples of human creatures in positions of authority (first, kings; then, masters; then husbands), but these three examples

¹ Cf. Most commentaries; contra, all translations. The argument **against** “creature/creation” is rooted in the (proper) assumption that we cannot *submit* ourselves to *every* human creature because submission here assumes hierarchical authority and obedience (contra Michaels). However, given the meaning of *ktisis* everywhere else in Scripture (and even outside of Scripture) and given the context here in 1 Peter, I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that Peter is simply assuming “every human creature [*in any position of authority*].” The argument **for** “institution” (cf. ESV) is the use of this Greek word (*ktisis*) in secular Greek for the founding of cities or buildings (cf. Grudem). However, as many commentators point out, Peter goes on to speak not of structures or institutions, but of *people* (kings and governors, masters, husbands).

represent *all* the positions of authority in this world including parents, teachers, employers, church leaders, etc. So, in so far as our circumstances or our station and lot in life has placed us in the realm of any kind of human authority, we are commanded to submit ourselves to that authority – to that “human creature.” What does it mean to submit ourselves? To submit really means to place ourselves “under” and in most contexts (including this one) it assumes obedience.

Now, at one level this should be sounding really, really strange to us. Remember who we are!— We’re sojourners and foreigners in this world; ransomed and begotten anew as children of God; a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own special possession! And after all that, we’re supposed to submit ourselves to every human creature in any position of authority over us?—Even to unbelieving Gentiles? If you really think about it, there’s something about this that could feel completely wrong. But then, if we think about it even *more* deeply and *more* carefully we’ll come to see a paradox – that this way of “submission”—of submitting ourselves to every human creature—is actually the only way that truly makes sense of the Gospel. Our first reminder of this comes right here at the beginning when Peter says to all of us:

II. 1 Peter 2:13b — Submit yourselves to every human creature [in any position of authority over you] **on account of the Lord...**

So right away, Peter sets up this really stark contrast between the **mortal human creatures** in temporary positions of authority over us (kings and governors and masters and husbands) and the **sovereign King over all kings and Lord over all lords whose rule over us is everlasting**. Peter certainly isn’t being subtle here. So why does he do this? It’s not at all to demean those who are in authority over us, or to make us “look down” on them as lowly human creatures. That would completely defeat the point of calling us to submit ourselves to them. The reason Peter’s highlighting this contrast is to show us what true biblical submission is. He wants us to see how the *Christian’s* submission and obedience is fundamentally different from the submission and obedience—from the “good conduct”—of all the rest of the world. You see, it’s when we have this difference between the human **creature** in authority over us and the sovereign **Lord** who rules ultimately in every detail of our lives—it’s when we have this difference firmly fixed and settled in our minds that we’ll be empowered to submit ourselves to the human creatures in authority over us even in those times when it would otherwise be the most difficult.

“Submit yourselves to every human creature [in any position of authority over you] **on account of the Lord...**” Isn’t this really the ultimate difference between the submission of the Christian and the submission of the non-Christian? We can’t ever overestimate the significance of those five words – “**on account of the Lord.**” The unbeliever submits to human authority for many reasons – because he already agrees with the authorities, because he fears the authorities, because he believes that those authorities are the key to a stable and orderly society. But in all three of these cases, the unbeliever always submits to human authority as an end in itself. The unbeliever always submits to human authority only **AS** a **human** authority. Not so with us! We submit to human authorities as those who are **God’s creatures** and so always **on account of the Lord**. This means first of all that we see the human **creatures** in authority over us always in the bright light of the sovereignty and providence of God. If they are, indeed, **human creatures**, and if Jesus is, indeed, the **sovereign Lord**, then how can we not see things in this light?

So the first thing Peter wants us to see is that the human authorities are not ultimate – God is. And far from giving us a reason to resist human authority, it’s this truth that actually gives us the freedom to fully submit ourselves in obedience to the human authorities in our lives. If they are not ultimate, and God is, then their authority over us must derive ultimately from His sovereignty and lordship and providential governing of all things in our lives. Do we believe this? And if so, then why do we submit? Not on account of any inherent worthiness in the human creature (often times they won’t be worthy), and not ultimately on account of the human creature at all, but always “on account of the Lord” who rules over all. Why do we submit? We could take it one step further and say: Because we see now how our submission to *the Lord* can only be lived out by submitting ourselves to *every human creature* that has been granted authority in our lives.

Now that Peter has given us this biblical and theological foundation for submission (a submission that’s to be the context for all our doing of good), he goes on to give us the first example of where this submission is to be worked out in our lives.

III. 1 Peter 2:13c–14 — Submit yourselves to every human creature [in any position of authority over you] on account of the Lord, 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.

Brothers and sisters, here’s where we really see the rubber meeting the road. The emperor at the time of Peter writing this letter was almost certainly Nero. And Peter hasn’t forgotten that among the governors appointed by a previous emperor was a wicked man named Pontius Pilate. Peter hasn’t forgotten about these things, but neither has he forgotten what he himself heard Jesus say about paying taxes to Caesar. Some men came to Jesus one day and asked Him:

➤ Matthew 22:17–22 — Tell us... what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

What was Jesus saying? If the money has Caesar’s image on it, then aren’t you using Caesar’s money? If you don’t want to pay taxes to Caesar, then stop using the money that he coined and minted. But if you keep on using Caesar’s money (as you will certainly have to do), then what does this mean? It means that in God’s providence and sovereignty, you’re living in this world in the realm of Caesar’s authority. And if that’s the case, then we are to purposefully and diligently submit ourselves *to* Caesar by giving *to* Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Who is it that mints the money that we use every day of our lives? It’s the U.S. Government. So by using the money that is the property of the U.S. Government, what we’re doing is acknowledging that in God’s providence and sovereignty, we’re living in this world under the authority of the U.S. Government, and so we have a responsibility to submit ourselves to that authority. If the government uses its own money which it hasn’t allowed us to keep in order to pay for the murder of unborn and defenseless human beings, we know that though we are the ones who paid the taxes, this innocent blood will still be wholly on its own head and not on ours. What we’ve done is give to the government what already belonged to the government in obedience to **our Lord’s command** – or as Peter says: “on account of **the Lord**.”

For the Christian, Caesar is not “Lord”—even though the emperor cult of Peter’s day said that he was. And it’s precisely because Caesar was not Lord that the Christians were free to submit themselves *to* him.

Jesus said: “Render **to Caesar** the things that are Caesar’s, and **to God** the things that are God’s.” Since Caesar was not God, therefore the Christians were not to give to Caesar the things that belonged to God – they were not to give to Caesar their worship or their ultimate allegiance. In Acts, when the Apostles were commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus it was Peter who answered for them all:

➤ Acts 5:29 — We must obey God rather than men.

But what we have in Matthew and in Peter is not primarily a warning against obeying the government when the government contradicts the commands of God. What we’re mainly being given is the biblical and theological foundation for freely submitting ourselves to the government even when it’s embodied in wicked men like Nero and Pontius Pilate. Remember how Jesus answered Pilate when Pilate said to Him, “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” (Jn. 19:10) What did Jesus say?

➤ John 19:11 — Jesus answered [Pilate], “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

Because we know that “Nero” is not God, but only one of God’s “human creatures,” we can freely submit ourselves to him as one who has been granted authority in our lives only under the all-encompassing sovereignty of the only true “Lord” who rules over all (though to us, often times, mysteriously).

So coming back to Peter, he describes the governors as those “sent by [the emperor] to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” (cf. 2:12) Again, Peter isn’t being naïve about the wickedness and the corruption of rulers and governments. But in general, overall terms, we need to remember that even evil rulers and “bad” governments commend (or protect) “good citizens” – people who obey not just the moral laws of the government (like laws against murder and theft), but also the civic laws of the government (like tax codes and building permits). And so what Peter wants us to see, here, is that submission is our great opportunity *and* responsibility as Christians:

IV. 1 Peter 2:15 — For this [submission] is the will of God, so that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

Since Christians would not give to Caesar the things that were God’s—since they would not worship Caesar or pledge their ultimate allegiance to Caesar or participate in the practices of the emperor cult that were such a big part of their culture and society—they were naturally looked upon with suspicion. They were accused of undermining the public order and endangering the fabric of society. It was assumed that because Christians worshiped only one God and confessed only one Lord Jesus Christ, therefore they must be a subversive element in the society. How

could they not be? They must be a danger to the public good. How could they not be? And so what Peter says is that it's *by* doing good—it's *by* submitting ourselves diligently and purposefully to the governing authorities—that we have the opportunity of silencing the ignorance of foolish people.

Don't we feel ourselves to be more and more in this same position today? As Christians, because we're not "progressives" we must therefore be a threat to the public good. We must be endangering the fabric of society. And so this should actually be one of our greatest motivations to always be doing the "good" of obeying and submitting ourselves to the governing authorities however, and wherever, and whenever possible. In other words, we submit not just to avoid getting in trouble, but rather so that by all means possible we might always put the lie to what is false and bring honor and glory to God.

The world says it's our allegiance to Christ alone that must make us harmful or even dangerous citizens, when in fact it's our allegiance to Christ alone that frees us to be the best and most submissive and most obedient citizens in all the world. And that's what we want to be demonstrating to the world in all our conduct and living – with the result that we see submission to the government as actually our privilege and our joy.

Sometimes the baseless slander of unbelieving people can be put to silence right now. This was a major theme of Luke when he wrote the book of Acts. Luke was always intent on showing how in all his evangelistic activities, Paul was always an upstanding, law-abiding citizen of the Roman empire (cf. Acts 16:36-39; 18:12-16; 19:35-41; 23:26-30; 24:10-13; 25:6-8, 17-21, 24-27; 26:30-32) But if not in the present, we know that the baseless slander of the unbelievers will ultimately be silenced on the day of visitation when everyone will be compelled to acknowledge the "good" lives of submission and obedience that God's true children have lived to His glory. (cf. 2:12) We must never, ever, give the world any legitimate reason for its slanders and accusations against us. Instead, we must actively, purposefully live in such a way as to silence those slanders by demonstrating how groundless and baseless they are.

But now we need to remember that this isn't just about being citizens who are "*good*"; it's about being citizens who are "*holy*." Christians aren't the only people in the world who obey the governing authorities, and yet we are the only people in all the world who obey the governing authorities as an expression of our ultimate submission to the only true Lord over all, Jesus Christ. And so Peter continues in verse 16:

V. 1 Peter 2:16— [Submit yourselves]² as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but [submitting] as bondslaves³ of God.

² There is no verb here in the Greek, so it must be supplied from the previous context. The ESV's "live as people who are free..." seems to take the participle "doing good" as the assumed verb. And yet "doing good" is itself simply a "fleshing out" of the main verb at the beginning of the verse ("submit yourselves"). Ultimately, then, Peter is calling us to submit ourselves to authority as people who are free *and* as people who are servants of God.

³ I translate "bondslaves" because I don't believe that in our day and in the context of the Christian church "servants" can truly convey the force and weight of the Greek word "*doulos*." On the other hand, "bondslaves" may perhaps mitigate some of the baggage that is rightly and sadly associated with the simpler rendering of "slaves."

So what Peter has been implying and assuming all along, he now says explicitly. We submit ourselves in obedience to the governing authorities ultimately because we are free. That's a concept that sounds totally upside down and inside out, but in fact it makes wonderful, beautiful, perfect sense.

As Christians we are **free**. Free from what? Free from sin. Free from death. Free from fear. Free from the mastery of the god of this world. Free from all our old existence and from all the futile ways handed down to us through the generations. We are indeed free!

And how did we come into a freedom like this? We've been **ransomed** by the precious blood of Jesus Christ **in order that we might be** a people for God's own special possession. (cf. 1:18-19; 2:9) When God set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt, He was setting them free **into** His own service. So also, when God ransomed us and set us free from all our previous existence defined by the ways of this world, He did this in the only way possible – by setting us free **into** wholehearted submission and obedience to Him – as His “bondslaves.” (v. 16b; cf. Rom. 6:16-18)

So on the one hand, we've been set free from our old need to rule and run our own lives. On the other hand, we've been set free into the realm of the absolute lordship and sovereignty of Jesus Christ. And so it's this glorious freedom that we have now in Christ which means that we are, indeed, free to submit to and obey every human creature in a position of authority over us.

Think about it this way: The very essence of our response to the Gospel is one of submission and obedience, isn't it? Because of the Gospel, we are all bondservants and slaves of God. And so it's the freedom of **this** new life of submission and obedience that we're actually “free” to live out now in all our submission to the human creatures—even the pagan and unbelieving human creatures—who have been granted authority over us. It's really a wonderful and an amazing thing!

“[Submit yourselves] **as people who are free**, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil [because that wouldn't be true freedom!], but [submitting] **as bondslaves of God.**” And so we're reminded once again that true biblical submission is not to the human authorities **as ultimate** (contrary to the submission found in the world), but only to the human authorities **as creatures of the one Lord and God that we worship and serve.**

We are in every way free to submit. And, in fact, our freedom is never displayed more powerfully or given more eloquent expression than when we're living in true submission and obedience to every human creature. Here's something crazy and wonderful to think about: Submission is the ultimate expression of our freedom. Even though Peter introduces this whole idea of our freedom in connection with submitting to the governing authorities, we're going to see in the coming weeks that without this concept of “freedom” there can never really be true biblical submission of any kind – whether of slaves to their masters, or of wives to their husbands, or of children to their parents, or in any other context at all.

We're also going to see that if submission and obedience really is the very essence of our response to the Gospel, then one of the reasons Peter specifically addresses slaves and wives in

the coming verses is because their calling to submit illustrates and displays the kind of life that we are ultimately all called to live – lives of true, wholehearted submission and obedience in everything; lives lived truly as bondslaves under the authority of God. All the “good” that we’ll ever do as Christians in this world can only be lived out in the context of real, biblical **submission – submission** ultimately to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And so Peter concludes now with four commands that summarize the thrust and the spirit of this passage.

VI. 1 Peter 2:17 — Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

If we’ve all been set free into the service of God as His bondslaves, then we will feel ourselves free to honor everyone – because who are we, and what are we, but bondslaves of the Lord? We will feel ourselves utterly free to love the brotherhood with sacrificial, self-giving love, because who are we, and what are we, but bondslaves of the Lord? And we will feel ourselves free to honor the governing authorities with our submission and obedience precisely because we’ve learned not to fear those who are human creatures, but to fear only God, whose willing bondslaves we are.

Brothers and sisters, as bondslaves of God, let us all live freely in the constant spirit of submission. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.