



NATIONS UNDER GOD

SERIES: 1 PETER LIVING FAITHFULLY WHILE SUFFERING

1 Peter 2:13–17

10th Message

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Over the past several months our country has been immersed in an emotionally charged election. We now stand on the verge of a new administration in Washington unlike anything we have ever seen before. And it appears that the emotions, tensions, and opinions surrounding the new president will continue well past the inauguration this Friday. I would venture to say that the actions and words of Donald Trump will be watched with microscopic scrutiny. I would also venture to say that the opinions in this room are widely diverse, and that we could get in a heated debate within minutes.

What is our attitude towards this new administration? What is our Christian responsibility towards government and laws in general? Amazingly, as if by providence, this is the topic we encounter today in our studies in 1 Peter.

We come now to Peter's version of the household codes, or household tables. Similar teaching appears in Ephesians, Colossians, and Titus. What we find in the New Testament coincides with non-Christian writings regarding proper conduct in society. Over the next three weeks we will talk about governing authorities, slaves and masters, and wives and husbands.

These texts raise some definite challenges and problems. The social environment of the first century was quite different than today's. Are these texts appropriate? And if they are, how do we map these teachings into our culture, or any culture? Do we carry them straight across as if, for example, living in the U.S. is the same as living under Roman rule? Or living in China is the same as living in Britain? Or even living in an Asian family is the same as living in a Caucasian family in the Bay Area?

We don't have slavery in the U.S., but what can we learn about slaves and masters? Would a marriage of a believing woman to a pagan Muslim look the same as your marriage? What can we say about social reform, liberation of Third World countries, or a Christian's involvement in politics, since there is no direct teaching on these matters in the New Testament?

Yikes! This is above my pay grade. Frankly I have many more questions than answers. And while I find the discussions quite stimulating, preaching is a different matter altogether. I would much prefer a fireside discussion, and perhaps the next three weeks will serve as an appetizer for what I hope will be healthy and edifying discussions. Here is the text:

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. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pet 2:13–17 ESV)

There isn't much on government in the New Testament. What we read here is similar to Romans 13 and Titus 3. We are told in 1 Timothy 2 to pray for kings and those in high positions. Jesus told us to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

The instruction is to submit to human institutions. This involves both kings, who are over everyone, and appointed governors, which was the case in the provinces of Asia Minor, where Peter's readers were located. This instruction seems to apply to all levels of government. The governing authority in Peter's day was Rome—not the best of situations. He probably wrote this letter before his readers came under heavy state persecution by Nero.

The word “submit” means to “place yourselves under” and is the word given to both slaves and wives in the following verses. Submission involves respect and obedience, but this might look different depending on the relationship. And submission for us might look different than for a citizen of Syria. We will develop this more in a bit.

Governing authorities serve an important function. They keep law and order. Without government, society would be dominated by evil and result in chaos, which is why every people-group in history has developed some sort of leadership. Government also recognizes and commends good citizens who not only keep the law but benefit society in some way, going beyond what might be expected. This might include benefactors who help to build schools, libraries, and hospitals. This week the Helen Dillon Foundation donated 500 million dollars to UCSF. I am sure there will be a large plague somewhere on campus.

Living in accordance with the laws of society makes sense if you don't want to pay traffic fines or go to jail for tax evasion; although, some people decide that breaking the law is worth the risk. But Peter says that Christians are to obey the law and submit to governing authorities, because this is the will of God. We are to submit for the Lord's sake, for the sake of Jesus. This is an important point because moderns do not like political submissiveness. This is very clear in the U.S.

How many times do you hear someone say, “I don't agree with that law and therefore I am not going to keep it”? Our modern culture wants the freedom to choose what they want to do and what they don't want to do. This is true in the spiritual realm as well as the political.

Now, remember from last week that Peter's concern is for Christians to live in a right relationship with society. Unlike our society, how they conducted themselves then was a public, not a private, concern. Therefore, Peter tells these Christians they are to abstain from fleshly passions, which includes not rebelling against authorities. He calls them to live in a way that has a positive influence on society, even though they are resident aliens, i.e. non-citizens. And even if they suffer, they are to continue doing good, living with high character,

with grace and compassion. They are to be holy, as God is holy. The idea of good and doing good appears twice in this text. We will also see this in passages regarding slaves and marriage.

Remember also that Peter's highest priority is the gospel. His concern here is that these Christians conduct their lives in such a way as to not generate an unnecessary, negative perception of Christianity. As we saw last week, some of Peter's readers were being labeled as evildoers due to the rumors circulating about their practices. Thus, Peter instructs these Christians to submit to governing authorities, to silence, literally muzzle, ignorant and foolish people. His goal was to change the perception of society's view and attract people to Jesus. The context of verses 11-12 is key to understanding this material on social conduct.

What does this mean for today? It means we that we are to have a proper attitude towards governing authorities and we are to keep the laws. We pay our taxes, maintain fiscal responsibility, and have high ethical standards. Avoiding the law, not paying debt, and living unethically are outside God's will. Churches who misappropriate funds and behave unethically operate outside of God's will. The perception of Christianity today is already negative. Not submitting to government will only fuel that perception. The name of Jesus is at stake. Criminals don't make good witnesses for Jesus unless they repent and believe.

So far so good. But this is too simplistic. As I have thought through these verses, many questions and observations have occurred to me pertaining to the U.S., other countries, and across time. For example:

What about a situation when the state is doing wrong things, or prohibits the worship of the God of the Bible? In that case the general principle is the same—to do the will of God. If the state is violating God's will, then our responsibility is to the Lord, despite the consequences. In Nazi Germany, the Confessing church spoke against the state church which had begun to integrate Nazi teaching into their congregations. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others paid the highest price.

The religious intolerance of 17th century England led to the witness and writings of the Puritans. John Bunyan began his classic *Pilgrims Progress* while in prison. Our lives are so much richer because of Bonhoeffer, Bunyan, and many others. The conclusion I come to is that having the right laws or the right government does not necessarily equate to the growth of God's kingdom. While we promote Christian ethics and morality, living holy lives despite persecution and suffering has much more influence.

But I also ponder many other things: should the early colonists have rebelled against England? That is not a question I have ever considered. What if the southern states had submitted to the government and not seceded from the union? Over 600,000 lives would have been spared. How would you have lived as a Christian in south at that time? Even today the Confederate flag is flown in many places, and only recently has it been removed from the University of South Carolina. What is the attitude behind these actions, defiance or mere nostalgia?

In the early 1900s we might have been talking about prohibition or a woman's right to vote. Think about that. We almost had a woman president. In the 1960's we would have been talking about Vietnam and conscientious objectors. Mohammad Ali incurred public outrage for his stand against the war, but later in life was greatly honored as "The Greatest." In the 60s we also would have

been talking about civil rights. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day and we remember the brave actions of many who brought about great change in our country though non-violent means. But as we have seen recently, there is still a long way to go.

Today we are talking about laws governing gun control, health care, marijuana, gay marriage, and use of bathrooms. The laws restricting bathroom use to birth gender is causing great debate, not only in North Carolina, but nationwide. Large events scheduled to take place in North Carolina have been cancelled because of the controversy.

From our gender and sexuality meetings last year we have seen that families are facing really tough issues in the public schools. I think these issues will grow greater and greater. Next week is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, and once again our thoughts will turn to the decision of *Roe vs. Wade*. As Christians, we are deeply involved in our government and laws.

Living in the U.S. is quite complex. We have the freedom to protest. We have free speech. We can voice disagreement. We have the right to burn the flag or kneel at the playing of the national anthem. One could not do this in other countries. We have the right to political opinions. We have multiple political parties and can vote leaders into and out of office. Living under Roman rule might have been much simpler. And then we might think about how we would apply this text in other countries of the world. Democracy is not the only form of government, not the best or the worst. The best form of government might be a benevolent king.

These are challenging questions. The Bible does not give us black and white answers on healthcare or legalization of marijuana. Therefore, as Christians we have a great responsibility to think about our attitudes and how we dialogue with our culture. Young people today are leaving the church because they do not want pat answers. They want to talk about controversial issues. Young people today want to be listened to, not preached at.

I left the church in the 60s because it was not relevant during the hippie movement and Vietnam. What is our responsibility to the younger generation? We can't relate to millennials in the same way as boomers, as an article in the *San Jose Mercury* pointed out yesterday. And might God be calling PBC to be a place where we can discuss the issues of our culture?

Well, I am just scratching the surface. Even though Peter has no specific answers, he gives us some general instructions that should govern our hearts and our actions.

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pet 2:16-17)

First, Peter gives a word about living free, but as servants of God. As Christians, we have been set free from sin and death. We are new creations in Christ. We are citizens of heaven, where our inheritance is safely stored. But we are not to take advantage of our new identity and use freedom for evil, to use freedom as a veil to hide evil, i.e. indulging in fleshly patterns and ignoring the standards of society. We have been given the freedom to do what is right, not absolute liberty. Peter's concern is that the Christians who are strangers and exiles living in Asia Minor won't care about their society. He does not want them to use their freedom to disregard governing authorities. Our concern should be the same. Notice the contrast we keep seeing between evil and good.

We are free in Christ, but we are servants of God, slaves of Christ. “Christian freedom rests not on escape from service but on a change of master.”¹ Submitting to human authorities is ultimately submitting to God. Calvin writes, “The Christian life ‘is a free servitude, and a serving freedom.’”²

Second, Peter closes this section with four very short but very rich exhortations. Honor all. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. Honor is the same word in exhortation one and four, highlighting secular vs. Christian concerns, i.e. all and king vs. brethren and God (an ABBA pattern). We also see a contrast between two social groups, society and Christian community, and two authorities, God and king (an AABB pattern).

These four commands also give four contexts in which the Christian lives: social, ecclesial, spiritual, and political: “Christians must live well by giving each type of relationship its due”³

Honor all. Notice that there is no qualifier. We show respect to every person the same—rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, friend or enemy, democrat or republican, independent of gender orientation or race or skin color. We don’t honor some people more than others. We are to give each person honor because they are a human being created and loved by God.

Perhaps this is a place where we can say a word about social reform. Peter is not advocating maintaining the status quo. As Christians, we stand against injustice because injustice is the result of sin. We condemn sin through preaching and actions. We do promote Christian ethics and morality as possible, bringing light into a dark world.

When people are dehumanized and treated as objects or animals they become animals. Because we are to honor all, we seek ways to uphold the rights of those who are less fortunate or being treated unjustly, while at the same time accepting unjust suffering in the pattern of Christ without retaliating. We can act without retaliation. This comes up in the following verses. A great example of how to seek social reform is the efforts of William Wilberforce and his stand against slavery—as opposed to what took place in the United States.

Another reason young people are leaving the church is because they hear Christians saying that the world is going to pot. They see Christians abdicating any responsibility for society, the world, and the Earth. Christians should be on the leading edge of social reform for the Lord’s sake, as servants of God.

Love the brethren. Love people in the community of faith, people who confess Jesus to be Lord. This repeats what Peter said in verse 1:22, “love one another.” This might include loving Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and Charismatics, even though we might differ on points of theology or practices. Given our context, can we love one another if we have a different opinion about gun control or prefer a different political party? Can we keep our cool when we discuss controversial topics? We are free to disagree, but we are not free to withhold love based on political agendas. Loving the brethren is so essential because it is our love for one another that reveals the love of God to the world.

Fear God. This picks up on what Peter wrote in 1:17, “conduct yourselves in fear throughout your time in exile.” An old hymn says “fear him ye saints and you will then have nothing to fear.”⁴ If you grew up in Britain, you are familiar with the hymn that includes that line. We don’t fear changes in immigration laws or healthcare or

economic policies or hacking by other countries. Our fear is reserved for God alone.

The Bible is clear. God is on his throne. He rules over the nations. The pledge of allegiance states, “one nation under God.” The reality is that all nations are under God. Every ruler, no matter how evil, is ultimately under God’s authority. And God raises nations to power and tears them down to work out his purposes for humanity.

Honor the king. This means that, like him or not, we are to give honor to President Trump appropriate to his station. We honor public officials and governing authorities and the laws of our nation provided that they do not run contrary to God’s will. Otherwise, of course, we are responsible to a higher authority.

About a month ago I met a new neighbor. He had heard of me, and asked me if I was the pastor. I said, “Yes, do you have a job for me?” He replied, “Pray for our country.” I said, “At our church, we do that all the time.” Let us, as Christians, be known for praying for our leaders and not for our hateful attitudes or derogatory comments. May God’s grace be with us as we face the challenging issues of our culture today, trusting that God is with us.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

**“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”**

**“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”**

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Rom 11:33–36)

1. Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, BENCT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 177.

2. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 177.

3. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 177.

4. Samuel Worcester, *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of Isaac Watts* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1834), 333. Online: <https://books.google.com>

