

1 P E T E R

A VERSE BY VERSE STUDY THROUGH PETER'S EPISTLE

SESSION OBJECTIVE: 1 PETER 2:13-17

To understand how the church honors government as a divine institution.

What Freedom Looks Like

Freedom is an important word for the American people. Perhaps some of the most important words in American history are found in the second paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Happiness, of course, did not just mean the basic definition that we hold today. It meant something like, “prosperity, thriving, or well-being.” And liberty, of course, is just another word for *freedom*. Freedom is a cornerstone value of the American people, an identity even.

It happens that freedom is also a major cornerstone of the Christian experience, albeit in a much grander sense, and with more responsibility too. Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Of course, the Jewish people had a history of slavery with Egypt, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. There is almost certainly a little bit of word play here, but in the truest sense, all people (not just the Jews) have been held captive by another captor even worse than any nation. All are held by *sin*, and it is Christ’s work on the cross that sets us free (Rom. 8:1-2). This does not mean, however, that we have freedom to do whatever we please. In our passage this morning, Peter will tell us: “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” In other words, our freedom grants us the ability to do what we could not do prior to atoning work of Christ, which is serve Him. We are no longer slaves to sin, but to Him who has set us free.

Every Human Institution

Verses 13 through 17 pose some of the most difficult interpretive decisions we will have as specifically American Christians, depending on some varying factors. Peter tells us to, “be subject, for the Lord’s sake, to every human institution,” and includes the Emperor as well as the governors sent by him. The command to submit to governing authorities is not unique, but found in various texts in the New Testament. Paul wrote to Titus, “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed” (Tit. 3:1). To the Roman Christians Paul said, “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves” (Rom. 13:1-2). He goes on to even make a case for paying taxes: “For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.”

Peter goes on to say several things regarding this topic as well. Below is a breakdown of some key concepts in this passage.

BE SUBJECT

The command in this passage can easily be identified because it is in the imperative mood: “Be subject!” The Greek word for this is ὑποτάσσω (hypotassō), and it means something like, “to place or arrange under, to subordinate.” The idea conveyed is the act of bringing yourself under the authority of someone else. The whole of the Christian experience could be typified by this kind of mindset. Submission is woven throughout the Christian life. We find general submission between all Christians (Eph. 5:21), and special submission between wives and husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:5). We are to submit ourselves to God (Jas. 4:7). Conversely, non-Christians make a habit of *not* submitting to God (Rom. 8:7, 10:3; Ps. 81:11). It is the posture of the Christian heart to not think highly of ourselves, “but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3). This mimics the mind of Christ, who, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6-7). Submission, as it turns out, is actually a sign of spiritual strength, not weakness.

EMPERORS AND GOVERNORS

Peter makes reference to, “every human institution,” but then specifies his intended target: “Whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors sent by him” (1 Pet. 2:13-14). The word for emperor here is the Greek word βασιλεύς (basileus), which is the generic word for *king*. Peter likely does not solely have the Roman emperor in mind, but instead is speaking in generalities. The idea here is that Christians are to be subject to governing authorities, whoever they may be. For them it would have been the emperor, and for us, a president or chancellor, depending on the country. The “governors” mentioned follow this same line of reasoning; this is a reference to anyone subservient to the king that has been given authority to do his/her bidding.

The quality and character of the leader is not a contingent factor on our submission. Christians have attempted to reject submission to modern leaders based on their lack of morality, but this fails to understand what historical secular leadership looked like in the early church. The reigning emperor at the time of this letter was likely Nero, the mad emperor who hated Christians, burned Rome, blamed it on them, and incited violence against them. There is also a case to be made for this letter to have been written under the reign of

Domitian. Either way, if morality were a factor in determining how subject Christians are to be to the emperor, Peter would not have written what he wrote. In fact, during Peter's time there was a full-blown emperor cult as well. Many people worshipped the emperor as a god, which is idolatry. Rather than a harsh and extreme swing in the opposite direction, Peter centers Christians on sound, reasonable truth. The emperor is not be worshipped, but he is to be respected and is deserving of our submission, not because of anything he has done, but, "for the Lord's sake" (1 Pet. 2:13).

THE PURPOSE

The purpose of such action is laid out clearly: "that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (1 Pet. 2:15). One of the things that Christians historically endured a great deal of was slander, specifically a brand of slander that painted Christians as rebellious and even mutinous citizens. By being submissive to governing authorities, they would put to shame their opponents because people could visibly see that what was being said about them was not true. In our freedom in Christ, we are to use our freedom for the good of the faith as servants of God, and one of the ways we serve the Lord is through our subjection to the authorities he has put in place.

A NOTE ON SUBJECTION TO GOVERNMENT

The message is clear; God has ordained governing authorities and as Christians we are commanded to submit to them. This is a difficult concept for Americans and people in democratically led nations to accept. In these kinds of systems, people are in place because *the people* elected those officials. However, the New Testament would argue that these people have come into office ultimately because God has ordained it to be that way, and thus to be rebellious against a government, even a government you did not vote for, is to be rebellious against the will of God.

There are, of course, times when it is appropriate for a Christian to distance themselves from the edicts of governing authorities. In instances where Christians are being compelled to openly sin, they should refrain regardless of the consequences. Examples include (but are certainly not limited to) Daniel 1:8-16 and Acts 5:29. In each of these examples, the people of God respectfully decline obedience, citing a higher moral calling. They are not divisive or vindictive in their resistance, nor do they call others to do the same. They simply live out their conviction before God and the people who compel them.

A Subtle Jab

Verse 17 ends with a final statement on the matter: "Honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the emperor." Peter is demonstrating a well-known (for its time) literary technique called *chiasm*. Chiasm seeks to emphasize a point by utilizing a specific form or pattern in the wording of a phrase. This particular phrase is patterned as follows: A1 B1 B2 A2. In other words, the statements "honor everyone," and, "honor the emperor" are meant to be understood as on the same level. Above those two statements are the more powerful, "love the brotherhood," and, "fear God." This is more or less a jab at the emperor and those who worship him. What Peter is saying by his word ordering is that loving other Christians and having a healthy fear of God are the highest priorities, but on the lower level we should honor everyone, even the emperor. The emperor does not hold the same value nor command the same respect as God or His church. He is just like, "everyone" else.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read 1 Peter 2:13. Who does Peter tell us we should be subject to? For whose sake are we to be subject to them? What does the word *emperor* likely stand for? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read 1 Peter 2:14. Who are the governors representative of? What is their role according to this passage?

Day Two

1. Read 1 Peter 2:15. According to whose will are we to do all of this?

2. Read 1 Peter 2:15. What does this kind of subjection accomplish?

Day Three

1. Read 1 Peter 2:16. What does it mean to live as free people to serve the living God?

2. Read 1 Peter 2:17. What kind of literary structure is this? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Four

1. Read 1 Peter 2:17. What are we to do for everyone, regardless of who they are or what they are like?

2. Read 1 Peter 2:17. What is our command towards other Christians? What about towards God? How do these commands differ from those towards everyone and the emperor? What is the underlying message there?

Week 12 Discussion: Humility and Submission

In this week's passage, we looked at what it means to be submissive to government, and why submission is such a big part of the Christian experience. It requires a level of humility that is not natural, but comes from

the Holy Spirit. Talk as a group about the difficulty of submission, especially when the person or group you are submitting to are not exactly *good*, and what you can do to work on becoming more humble.

1. Icebreaker: How difficult is it to submit to governing authorities? Why?
2. What are some difficult instances in which a Christian should still submit to government?
3. What are some difficult instances in which a Christian should respectfully refuse to submit to government?
4. How necessary is humility in order to live a life of submission to others? How do you become more humble?
5. Why is it important for the church to live this out? What is at stake?
6. Do you struggle with mixing your national identity and your spiritual identity? Talk as a group about the balance between loving your country but not putting it before the kingdom of God.

Takeaways:

1. The Christian life is a life of submission to everyone.
2. That submission is also called for towards governing authorities.

PRAYER REQUESTS: