

Pilgrims and the Powers that Be

¹³ Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and *for the* praise of those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—¹⁶ as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. ¹⁷ Honour all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. (1 Peter 2:13–17)

Nero was made emperor by his mother marrying the emperor Claudius. She asked him to formally adopt Nero as his own son, which made him the heir to the throne over his own natural born son, Britannicus. Claudius died in AD 54, probably poisoned by Nero's mother. He assumed the throne at the tender age of 17, while being guided by two philosophers, Burrus and Seneca. For a period the empire enjoyed sound government under their guidance. The first five years of his reign were wonderful. Sensible legislation was introduced to improve public order, reforms were made to the treasury and provincial governors were prohibited from extorting large sums of money to pay for gladiatorial shows in Rome. Nero was a hard worker and applied himself to his duties. He also considered liberal ideas, such as ending the killing of gladiators and condemned criminals in public spectacles. But something began to change.

Nero's resolve for administrative duties lessened and he withdrew more and more, devoting himself to such interests as horse-racing, singing, acting, dancing, poetry and immoral, bisexual sexual exploits. Nero took another man's wife as his mistress – the beautiful Poppaea Sabina.

Nero's mother, Agrippina, had since been moved away from the palace was angry and sided with Nero's other wife, Octavia. Nero angrily responded with various attempts on his mother's life, three of which were by poison and one by rigging the ceiling over her bed to collapse while she would lay in bed. Thereafter even a collapsible boat was built, which was meant to sink in the Bay of Naples. But the plot only succeeded in sinking the boat, as Agrippina managed to swim ashore. Exasperated, Nero sent an assassin who clubbed and stabbed her to death (AD 59).

Nero celebrated by staging yet wilder orgies and by creating two new festivals of chariot-racing and athletics. He also staged musical contests, which gave him further chance to demonstrate in public his talent for singing while accompanying himself on the lyre. In an age when actors and performers were seen as something unsavoury, it was a moral outrage to have an emperor performing on stage. Worse still, Nero being the emperor, commanded that no one was allowed to leave the Coliseum while he was performing, for any reason. The historian Suetonius writes of women giving birth during a Nero recital, and of men who pretended to die and were carried out.

Seneca soon found this too much to bear and resigned. This left Nero totally subject to corrupt advisers. His life turned into little else but a series of excesses in sport, music, orgies and murder. In AD 62 he divorced Octavia and then had her executed on a trumped-up charge of adultery. All this to make way for Sabina whom he married. (But then Sabina too was later killed. - Suetonius says he kicked her to death when she complained at his coming home late from the races.)

Then, in July AD 64, the Great Fire ravaged Rome for six days. Of fourteen districts, only four were undamaged by the fire. During this fire Nero, climbed on to the palace roof, from which there was the best overall view of the greater part of the fire and, and sang "The capture of Troy". But after the fire he used a vast area between the Palatine and the Equiline hills, which had been utterly destroyed by the fire to build his Golden House. Judging by the sheer scale of this complex, it was obvious it could never have been built, were it for the fire. And so quite naturally Romans had their suspicions about who had actually started it.

Nero, always a man desperate to be popular, therefore looked for scapegoats on whom the fire could be blamed. He found it in an obscure new religious sect, the Christians. And so many Christians

were arrested and thrown to the wild beasts in the circus, or they were crucified. Many of them were also burned to death at night, serving as 'lighting' in Nero's gardens, while Nero mingled among the watching crowds.

Then in AD 65 there was a serious plot against Nero. The plot was uncovered and nineteen executions and suicides followed, and thirteen banishments. There was never anything even resembling a trial: people whom Nero suspected or disliked or who merely aroused the jealousy of his advisers were sent a note ordering them to commit suicide.

Civil war eventually broke out, and finally the senate condemned the emperor to be flogged to death. As Nero heard of this he chose rather to commit suicide, which he did with the assistance of a secretary (9 June AD 68). His last words were, "What an artist the world loses in me."

It was this man who ruled when Peter wrote the text before us, calling on us to submit to government, and to honour the king. Not a noble king, not a godly emperor, not a wise ruler. Nero was on the throne when Peter wrote to Christians to tell them how to respond to governments.

Because Christians face hostility as Christians, they may be confused about how to respond to earthly governments. Some may think we should rebel against this world order, begin resistance movements. Some might think worldly governments will do nothing but persecute us, so we should avoid trying to do any good in society.

But the book of 1 Peter describes what Christians can expect from society. We will indeed suffer, and sometimes it will be at the hands of governments. But not always. We may also live through periods of peace, of co-existence with secular rulers, where the only problems we will have are those we create for ourselves by breaking legitimate laws. In those peaceful periods, and even in hostile periods, we can create a more favourable view of Christianity by the good that we do outwardly. There is a contribution we can make to the world without compromising our faith. We can be good citizens of both the earthly realm, and God's country.

Christians must avoid two ditches: the one is needless hostility and opposition to the powers that be, showing a disrespectful, even rebellious demeanour. The other is cowardly compromise with laws and rules that are sinful.

But between those ditches is the kind of Christian testimony that displays the best of Christianity to human authorities in the hostile times, and in the peaceful.

The key word of this whole section is submit. Submit to human government.

Peter has armed us inwardly before making us face outwardly towards our responsibilities in society: government, work, family. He's established us deeply in our position in Christ, the hope it gives us, the holiness and distinctiveness it gives us, the humility it gives us. Now, with all that weighty truth of what it looks like to have the grace of God internally, he now wants us to turn that hope, that holiness, and that humility outward toward a watching world.

You need an inner hope, an inner holiness, and an inner humility to submit to someone like Nero. And so Peter explains this submission in three ways: whom we submit to, why we submit, and how we submit.

I. Submit, Whenever Possible, to Governmental Authority: Whom

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and *for the* praise of those who do good.

Don't miss that first word, *therefore*. He told us in verses 11 and 12 that as pilgrims and strangers in

this world we should abstain from fleshly lusts, and maintain a godly life before the unsaved so that their slander might turn to salvation. Therefore, in light of that general command, Peter now applies it very specifically.

Be a pilgrim with a good testimony when it comes to government by submitting to every ordinance of man. Submit. This word means to fall in line, to obey orders, to yield up your rights to a command, to authority. It's a military term. Used for the rest of life, it means co-operate, submit, abide by the laws.

Now he gives us the scope of this obedience to human government by telling us it is to every ordinance of man. The word for ordinance is actually the word for creation. Something man has made to regulate life: laws, by-laws, regulations, standards, terms and conditions, all authority in life, Christians should submit to.

Peter explains this extends from the top to the bottom. Whether the king as supreme, which in his day would be the emperor, or whether to governors sent by the emperor to enforce the law: punishing evil and rewarding good. In Rome, governors, procurators, proconsuls, Roman military officers, tax collectors. All the minor authorities, bureaucrats, administrators that enforce the law, they're included in this.

Obey them. Follow the rules, whenever possible.

This is found throughout the New Testament.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. (Romans 13:1)

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, (Titus 3:1)

They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

The Bible's view of a Christian's relationship with government is a positive one. Get along with them, Scripture says. This epistle says, you may suffer for being a Christian, but don't bring additional woe and trouble into your life by acting lawlessly.

But the Bible does not make this submission absolutely universal and unqualified. We see that we submit for the Lord's sake. Or submission is ultimately to God and for God.

The fact that the word *ordinances* is the Greek word for creations reminds us that these human authorities and rules are created by man. They are not absolute, like God's authority. Human authority is derived authority, and that limits their authority. When human government oversteps its mark and commands what God has forbidden, or forbids what God has commands, Christians then have to do what Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego did before Nebuchadnezzar, what the apostles had to do before the Sanhedrin, and indeed, what Christians in Rome had to do under Nero: respectfully disobey.

The Bible teaches that God has created the world with different spheres of authority. There is the sphere of family, the sphere of the church, the sphere of human government. Each of those has its own legitimate authority, its own particular laws and responsibilities. But when one intrudes upon the other, Christians must say what the apostles said, "We must obey God rather than man".

For example, some governments have made laws regarding the spanking of children. That is a law that intrudes upon the sphere of the family. The government does not have the right to tell families how to train their children, and it does not have the right to forbid the correction that the Bible itself commands. Our government has made laws about educating our children. Educating our children is a matter of the family, not the state, and where those laws prohibit us from giving our children a

thoroughly Christian education, we must obey God rather than man. Our government has made laws about what may or may not be said about homosexuality in public. But what a Christian pulpit may or may not say is not governed by Parliament; it's governed by God's Word, and in those moments, a faithful preacher says, I must obey God rather than man.

Laws that replace the lordship of Christ over His church with the lordship of human government are not legitimate laws. The church belongs to Jesus, and what it does internally, how it worships, how it is organised, how it gathers, what it preaches, this comes from Christ, not from Parliament.

Now those are the exceptions. Those are the moments of conflict, the moments of painful clash between government and Christianity. But the norm, the average, the usual should be quiet compliance, yieldedness to the laws, the regulations, the compliances, the taxation, the bureaucracy. A Christian citizen should not be a headache to a ruler.

The secret of this humility is a living hope. My hope is not in a trouble-free life in this world. My hope is not to have perfect autonomy from everyone else. My hope is that I am born again by God's will and Word, that I have an eternal inheritance in the heavens that is eternally secure, a life of increasing joy the more I know and see of Christ, a life in God's family, fed by God's Word. So I am happy to be distinct, a different, holy people, worshipping God in the world, and for that reason, I can submit to people who may not be very worthy themselves, just like Nero. Hope and holiness, enable my humility.

This is whom and what we submit to. All human authority, whenever possible. But Peter now gives us another reason to motivate this submission.

II. Submit To Fulfil God's Will: Why

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men

We saw in verse 13 that we submit for the Lord's sake, He is the real reason why we are submitting. And now verse 15 expands on that. We read here that God's specific will, God's desire, what pleases Him is when Christians do the right thing in this area, it will have an effect on unbelievers.

Specifically, it is going to silence the ignorance of foolish men. How? Well, the ignorance of foolish men is what we saw in verse 12: people slander Christians. People speak of Christians and Christianity as the problem in society. In Peter's day, they accused Christians of being cannibals and eating human flesh in the Lord's Supper, they accused Christians of being immoral, they accused Christians who didn't support the military as being traitors and rebels.

In our day, people speak of Christians as being intolerant and full of hate. They speak of Christians as being proud and hypocritical. This is ignorance borne of a foolish, stubborn rejection of God.

Now God desires that this foolish ignorance be silenced. That is, He wants its arguments against Christianity to fall to the ground as baseless and empty when refuted not by more arguments, but by actions. It's that moment when a loudmouth is shouting out something he doesn't know about, and is stopped mid-sentence by a clear, visible opposite of what he is saying.

What are these actions that silence slander against Christians? He gives us a very general term in verse 15: doing good. But verse 17 really fleshes out what Peter means by doing good.

Honour all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

Here is Peter taking in the whole scope of a Christian's life. All contexts in which a Christian lives:

social, ecclesial, spiritual, and political. Christians must live well by giving each type of relationship its due.

Socially, Christians must honour all men. Whoever we meet, we should treat them with respect, courtesy, and consideration. Whether they rank high or low in society, we should treat them as if they are important, image-bearers of God. The CEO of the company, the beggar picking through your garbage, they both must be treated with honour. The world should look on believers and say, “they are truly the most humane of all of us.” This is doing good.

Ecclesiastically speaking, or church-wise, we must love the brotherhood. Fellow Christians must be treated with a special kindness, a more sacrificial giving, a more extended patience and servanthood. We must extend to each other the love Christ had for us on the cross. In front of a watching world, they should say, “Behold how they love one another. This is doing good.

Spiritually speaking, we should be known for fearing God. Fearing God is the kind of love you have for a God infinitely good and infinitely great. It is a love filled with deep reverence and respect. It is a love filled with loyalty. It is a love deeply submitted to Him. It is a love filled with gratitude for His grace. It is a love filled with dependence on Him. It is a love broken over our sin. It is a love filled with zeal and diligence to do His will. When you combine honour, gratitude, submission, dependence, childlike awe, and zeal, you have the fear of the Lord. It's not a flippant love. Nor is it a scared, servile love. It is a holy, reverent, humble love. When you worship that way, and serve that way, and live that way, you are doing good. The world looks on and says as in 1 Corinthians 14 “falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you. (1 Corinthians 14:25)

Politically speaking, we are told to honour the king. Show actual and verbal respect for the governing authorities. ⁷ Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Romans 13:7)

What about criticism? You can criticise what is legitimately wrong in the governance, but you cannot slander, you cannot speak with malice, you cannot speak evil. Can you ridicule their evil? Yes, some of the prophets ridiculed evil to show its foolishness. But you cannot lie, and you cannot insult for no reason. That wouldn't be honour.

Honour salutes the rank, knows the rank is there by God's design. You may recognise the person wearing the uniform is unworthy, as Christians certainly knew about Nero. But once you start insulting the rank itself, once you start disdaining the uniform, you're insulting God's order. Remember, some government is always better than no government. All the forms the word has seen: democracy, monarchy, autocracy, oligarchy, as good or bad as they might have been, are still God's restraint on evil. The ultimate evil is anarchy, when there is no law at all, and every man does what is right in his own eyes, where matters are decided by whoever has greater threat of violence. So when we salute the rank, we are saying, “Thank you God, for restraining evil, for placing some authority in the world, for creating some civil law and order.” Christians, of all people, should see God's hand in that and honour the authorities. When we do this, we are doing good.

No, this doesn't mean society and government will always side with Christians. But when we do good socially, and ecclesiastically, and spiritually, and politically, the slanderous charges that Christians are arrogant, divisive, hateful, intolerant, rebellious will fall away. It will be clear that these accusations have no basis. And our opponents will be revealed to be controlled by hatred, hatred for truth, lacking any real objective ground for their criticism of believers.

A famous incident occurred during the reign of Septimius Severus when local authorities raided a Christian gathering. Expecting to find seditious planning, they instead found Christians praying

aloud for the emperor's health and success in war.

One Roman official reportedly remarked, "We have found no traitors here."

The last thing Peter tells us about this submission has to do with how we do all this. What sort of attitude, what kind of mindset should we have when we do this?

III. Submit As Freeman: How

as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.

When you hear the words free or liberty, probably what doesn't come to mind is the word submit. Submit feels constrained, constricted, compelled, maybe forced, restrained. But Peter wants us to know that Christian submission to governing authorities is not primarily because of constraint, because of the threat of punishment, because of force.

It does not come out of weakness, or because we have no choice. This submission comes from being free, being a liberty, so it is a freely, lovingly, cheerfully chosen thing.

What are we free from? We're free from sin, and the old patterns of this world. We're free from the fear of death, which bonds people to worldliness and Satan's deceptions. We're free, but Christians should never use the words grace, or Christian liberty, or freedom in Christ as an excuse to do what displeases God. Christians shouldn't do what is sinful, or worldly, or questionable, or dubious, and then say, "we're free! We're not under the Law!" But Peter tells us that our freedom is a loving slavery to God. We've been set free from serving self, and now we happily serve God. Because you're always serving someone.

Freedom in Christ is not autonomy. Freedom in Christ is not independence from all authority. Freedom in Christ is not acting like there are no commands or rules that bind you. That's not freedom, that's personal anarchy. That's personal chaos. Our liberty sets us free to please God.

²² But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. (Romans 6:22)

¹³ For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Galatians 5:13)

In one sense, we're even free from being only citizens of this world.

²⁴ When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the *temple* tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the *temple* tax?" ²⁵ He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" ²⁶ Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷ Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you." (Matthew 17:24–27)

Jesus was saying that technically, He was exempt from paying the Temple tax, because He was more than a subject of the Temple, He was the Lord of the Temple. But to give no offence, Jesus provided the money. Now, we're not King Messiah. But we are sons of His kingdom, we are a royal priesthood. We're free in the ultimate sense that this world is not our home. But in the same spirit in which Jesus paid the tax, so we render our submission, as those who are free, but voluntarily give our submission.

I submit, not primarily because I have to, humanly speaking. It's because I want to, spiritually

speaking.

When the aged bishop Polycarp was arrested during a wave of Roman persecution, Christians urged him to flee. He did, for a time, but when soldiers discovered his location, he quietly welcomed them into the house.

Instead of resisting, he ordered that food and drink be set before his captors.

The soldiers—accustomed to fear and violence—were astonished. Here was a man the state deemed dangerous, yet he treated them with humility and kindness.

Before being taken away, Polycarp requested an hour to pray. The soldiers listened as he prayed, not only for the church, but specifically for the Roman authorities. The soldiers later said they regretted arresting such a gentle, law-abiding old man.

That's what it looks like when a Christian pilgrim has humility, holiness and hope. They respond to this world with humility that can submit freely, put to silence slander, and vindicate the name of Christ before unbelievers.