

## **1PETER 2:13-17    CBC 7.6.2020am**

**Read 1Peter 2:13-17** ... After several days of violent demonstrations in American cities in connection with the death of George Floyd, and at a time when people everywhere are being asked by governments to abide by the rules of lockdown, Peter's first words to us today are particularly striking: "*Submit yourselves ... to every human authority*" (v.13).

But Peter didn't know what the headlines would be this week. His teaching isn't meant to be topical but typical – that is, he's describing how to live as a Christian at any time, wherever you find yourself. Over the next few weeks, he's going to talk us through some typically tough scenarios: how to live as a Christian in a horrible workplace, a difficult marriage, even an imperfect church.

But he begins by telling us how to live as a Christian in a society that doesn't recognize the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And perhaps surprisingly, his first word to us is, "*Submit yourselves to every human authority.*"

### **SUBMIT YOURSELVES TO EVERY HUMAN AUTHORITY**

Immediately, we want to say, "But what about ...?" Well, this is the same Peter who famously said (Acts 5:29): "*We must obey God rather than men!*" But he doesn't start with the exceptions! He starts with the general principle: "Submit yourselves to every human authority."

That's a broad statement, embracing not just civil government but other legitimate human authorities such as parents in the home, or elders in the church! And then Peter gives it a narrow focus: the emperor, as the supreme authority, or local governors – in other words, the state. God has established all these patterns of authority for the orderly functioning of human life, and He is honoured when we submit to them.

And God means to bless us, not burden us, because as sinful people in a fallen world, we need to be restrained from our own worst excesses. *Think of this: what might you do if you could get away with it? A terrifying thought! I can't dwell long on that because my mind rushes to such appalling evil. I horrify myself.* It's only the grace of God that restrains us, and one of the means He uses to rescue us from ourselves is human authority. That's God's mercy.

But that doesn't mean we like it! Do you know any kids who say, "*Mum, Dad, I love it when you tell me to put my phone down and tidy my room! It's so cool when you tell me I can't go to that all-night party! Thank you!*" Adults are no better. I've never heard someone say, "*I really love speed limits. They save me from my own idiocy!*" Or, "*These lockdown rules are great – they protect other people from my selfish behaviour!*"

Sin lives in our hearts, and we need protection from ourselves and from one another. Submitting to authority is, in principle, a blessing from God who knows how much we need to be restrained.

That doesn't mean those who exercise authority always do it rightly! What God calls them to do is v.14: "*to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.*" Notice that government's responsibility isn't just for material things (the economy), but for moral ones – punishing evil and rewarding goodness.

This ideal wasn't always reached in Peter's day – remember he lived under the emperor Nero who murdered Christians including Peter himself. Nor is authority perfectly exercised today, because it's exercised by people just as sinful as ourselves. It's why we don't place all our hopes on a political leader or party – because we know they will fail to live up to this calling. God knows that too – yet

He calls us to submit to the authorities so that there may be a measure of peace even in a fallen world.

We aren't told we can rebel just because we dislike a particular leader or policy. We may not understand why a particular person is in power, but God does. Just as He wastes no suffering, so He wastes no government appointment. He's working out His purposes.

The only exception to submitting to authority is if the authority commands us to sin. And then the words of Ac 5:29 apply: "*We must obey God rather than men.*" There is a higher Government than the government. So during the holocaust, Corrie Ten Boom was right to hide her Jewish neighbours from the Nazis rather than hand them over to murderers. The command to submit is never an excuse for doing evil ("*I was only obeying orders*") - Peter takes that as read (v.16: "*don't use your freedom as a cover-up for evil*").

But he knows even in his society that those issues are relatively rare in the life of most Christians. The government may do many things contrary to God's will, but when did it last command YOU to do something contrary to God's will? And so Peter concentrates on the norms of living the Christian life, not the exceptions. Submit yourself to every human authority, whether you agree with all the policies of that authority or not. *That means submitting to lockdown!*

## **LIVE AS GOD'S FREE PEOPLE**

Does all this sound restrictive? Well prepare yourself for an almighty paradox! v.16: "*Live as God's free people!*" Peter's first readers lived in an authoritarian society, but Peter's not trying to keep some repressive lid on them. "*Live as free people!*"

How do you submit AND be free people? The answer is: you submit freely! Not because you have to, but because you want to serve. It's a remarkable vision, especially under a brutal and repressive regime. How is it possible? Because of another element of this paradox: v.16 "*live as God's slaves*"!

Line those three things up! "Submit to every human authority ... but live as God's free people ... because you are God's slaves" - has Peter fried your brain yet? But he's not writing gibberish! This is the word of the Lord, and it makes sense.

Peter is saying that although we submit to the government, we don't *belong* to the government. We belong to God, and He's our loving heavenly Father, who gives us all we need so that we delight to please Him. We are His greatly loved children. That's our identity in Christ. And when we grasp this, something wonderful happens: it changes our motivation for living as good citizens from FEAR to LOVE.

Many people who aren't Christians keep the law because they're afraid of the consequences if they don't. They're motivated by fear. But as God's free people, we submit as an act of worship to please our heavenly Father - we're motivated by love. If you submit because otherwise they'll kill you, that's fear. But if you submit because Jesus chose to be killed for you, and you delight to serve Him as your Lord, that's love, and it's a life of freedom.

There's the Christian distinctive: that you submit *to* the authority, but not *for* the authority - rather, for the Lord. v.13: "*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority.*"

And this makes us *better* citizens. It means you won't just submit to carrying a Roman soldier's pack for one mile (as the law required) - you'll carry it for an extra mile (Matthew 5: 41), because

you're doing it for the Lord, in love. This is living on the front foot as a Christian – taking the initiative in serving society as a good citizen. Not grudgingly dutiful (“*I suppose so, if I must*”), but serving gladly and willingly.

Ironically, what enables us to serve society well is v.11: we are “*foreigners and exiles*” – we know this world isn't our home, so it doesn't control us. We're not depending on this world for our happiness, so we can serve others as those who have nothing to lose. The certainty of our future hope transforms our lives now. We actually become better citizens because we don't have to live nervously or defensively. We're God's free people.

Forget the old jibe about being “so heavenly minded we're no earthly use.” The boot is on the other foot. It's those who are most heavenly minded who turn out to be of most earthly use. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were those who thought most of the next. It's since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffectual in this. Aim at heaven and you'll get earth thrown in; aim at earth and you'll get neither.” (*from “Mere Christianity”*).

That's what Peter is saying. And here's why it matters:

### **SILENCE THE CRITICS BY DOING GOOD**

v.15: “*For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.*” God calls us to silence our critics not by killing them but by blessing them with our good lives. We should be the best citizens of our society. Even the way we respond to the authorities is gospel work. *Obey lockdown as gospel ministry!*

Good citizenship may include political involvement, especially in a democracy. We can serve governments by speaking out when they are making a mistake. We're free to influence government by voting in elections. We're free to challenge, to petition, to lobby. We can try to have a voice in the public square.

But even if our voice as Christians is ignored, our good works will continue to speak loudly. One reason why the gospel spread so quickly in the Roman empire was that the goodness of the Christians was so attractive. They rescued babies put out to die on the city rubbish dump and raised them as their own. They cared for the poor, whether Christian or non-Christian. They welcomed the homeless and the outcasts, they sheltered people after earthquakes, they nursed the sick during plagues when everyone else fled. They didn't fear sickness or death.

All these things set them apart from their pagan neighbours. So non-Christians said, “*What is it that drives these people to be so different, and to do so much good in this world?*” And of course, these Christians were providing evidence that their lives had been changed by the Holy Spirit. Their sacrificial living helped spread the gospel.

Interestingly, a growing number of western intellectuals who are not yet Christians themselves are recognising that nearly all the good that has come to western culture over the centuries has its origin in the gospel. And this is causing them to reconsider their hostility to Christianity, and to *wish* that the gospel were true. And some are getting converted (for more on this, see the article by Justin Bass: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/western-intellectuals-dreaming-christian-dreams/>)

So our good works speak even when people don't want to listen to our words. It's great to see Corsham Council commending our “Souper Friday” ministry on Facebook! But being good citizens

doesn't have to mean an organized ministry. Even our daily attitude speaks volumes: v.17: "*Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.*"

As we live in awe of God, have a particular love for other Christians – that's a great witness! But we also honour everyone else because they are made in God's image. In a society too often marked by demeaning insults or scathing comments, we're to treat everyone with dignity. Imagine the impact that might have in politics, schools, offices and homes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Submit yourselves to every human authority – but do it for the Lord's sake, as God's free people. Then the goodness of your lives in society will silence the lies of those who slander you as Christians. That's Peter's message.

Do you know how you'll become that kind of person? Not by focusing on being a good citizen, but by focusing on Christ, and on God's love for you in Him. Because that's what changes our hearts. And Peter is saying that when you have a heart like Jesus Christ you can live in this world and bring to it a touch of the world to come.

**PRAYER:** Sovereign God, you order our lives according to your love. Help us by Your Spirit to live in society in a way that shows your goodness and draws others to our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. AMEN.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION**

- Where do you find it hardest to submit to authority, and how does the gospel help you?
- Peter gives specific guidance for living well in society in v.17:
  - Show proper respect to everyone
  - Love the family of believers
  - Fear God
  - Honour the emperor

How are each of these working out in your life? Be specific!