



SUBMISSION—RECONCILING AN ANCIENT COMMAND IN A MODERN WORLD - Part 1

I Peter 2:13-17

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We're going to talk today about something that's hard for Americans to appreciate except if you're in the military. It's this matter of submission. The American sentiment is, "Nobody's going to tell me what to do." That sentiment slips right into the church. There's something about submission that we really don't like.

And the reason? If we're honest, we want to be the highest authority. We want to be the boss. We want to be independent and make our own decisions. We want to assert ourselves and assume control of our lives. It rankles us when people tell us what we can and cannot do.

So what do we have in this section of I Peter? Direct teaching to Christians to submit in three difficult situations. We're going to learn that it's Christian to submit and it's not Christian not to submit.

By now, you know what the key term in this section of I Peter is—"submit". It's a term that Peter uses six times in this little letter. It's prominent in his thinking. The word "submit" (hupotasso) is primarily a military term. It means "to come under order or rank of office". It has the idea of coming under the control or authority of those who have a higher rank. The person under the higher authority is under obligation to carry out their directives.

The first part of verse 13 governs what Peter has to say all the way through chapter 3. And this is it—it's God's will for Christians to submit to every human institution (literally, creation) that has a binding, God-sanctioned authority over them (vs. 13a). That's the broad umbrella for all the teaching on submission to come. Peter says that there are institutions on this earth that we must obey.

But there are multiplied thousands of human institutions in the world, all the way from schools to fraternal orders to unions. What does Peter mean? From the rest of the Bible, we get an understanding of which institutions we're to submit to. They're institutions that God has ordained as a binding hierarchy of authority to manage the affairs and wellbeing of human beings.

There are at least five of these human creations in the Bible to which submission by Christians is required.

- Government/citizen
- Husband/wife
- Parent/child
- Employer/employee
- Elders/church

In each of these institutions, God sanctions an authority to which others must submit. As we'll discover, not all of these institutions are easy to submit to. They can mistreat those under their authority. But Peter doesn't change the command. He still says, "Submit." Do you know what I was thinking when I was studying for this sermon? How wise it was to have given you stones during my sermon last week. I'd be crazy to arm you with stones this week and preach about submitting to difficult authorities.

The five human institutions I've just mentioned involve what I would call involuntary submission. In these cases, God has established a binding order of authority. The person under that authority is required to submit to the higher authority. A Christian should not consider it a choice. And the idea of submitting is not only in favorable conditions, it's submission when conditions are difficult.

There's another level of submission to human institutions. I call it voluntary submission. If you choose to join an organization beyond the ones ordained by God, then you need to come under its authority.

I went to a Bible college that had some strict rules. It had curfews. It had rules about dating and showing affection. It had rules about dress and entertainment. I knew all this going into it. But I chose to go. The choice to go meant that I needed to put myself under the authority above me.

What did I find when I got there? Students who kept breaking the rules. People who kept getting into trouble. They knew the rules before they got there but they refused to submit. One of these people became a friend. One day I saw him sitting in the campus commons with a forlorn look on his face. I said, "Hey Tim, what's wrong?" He replied, "I just got the HBHB treatment." I said, "What's that?" He said, "The holy boot to the holy butt." The dean had just kicked him out of school.

Most of the human institutions in the world involve voluntary submission. You don't have to join them. But if you do, submit to their authority. If you can't, quit the organization. Don't stay in an institution and cause trouble.

Today's teaching in I Peter isn't about voluntary submission. It's about involuntary submission. It's about submitting whether you want to or not. It's about submitting to a difficult authority when you'd rather take the law into your own hands. It's about doing right when you're tempted to resort to behavior that isn't becoming to the name of Christ.

I was going to deal with two of the three involuntary sub-mission situations in I Peter today—difficult governments and difficult bosses. The matter of difficult husbands was scheduled for the next sermon in the series. But these matters are so important and so relevant that I don't want to rush through them. So I've slowed things down a bit. I'm just going to deal with verses 13 through 17, the matter of submission to difficult governments. So please follow along as I read the text. READ I PETER 2:13-17.

The first case of involuntary submission Peter talks about is the government. For them it was the emperor and the governor. For us, it's the federal, state, and local governments. Even though Peter had just told us that we're citizens of heaven, he tells us that we must submit to the authority of this world's government. The good thing for us is—the government in America is not the enemy of Christians, at least not yet. In the days of Peter, the government was extremely antagonist to Christians.

That's what makes this teaching so amazing. He's telling Christians to be subject to a pagan government run by murderous leaders. Peter is writing under Emperor Nero who was ordering the persecution of Christians. Peter himself would become a martyr under his reign. And yet he says, "Submit". In fact in verse 17, he says, "Honor the emperor". What's the deal?

Peter explains the command to readers who were probably swallowing pretty hard. Perhaps they wanted to hear, "Resist the governor. March in the streets against him. Spread ill-will about him." That's what we'd like to hear. But Peter says nothing close to that. Instead, in the face of a government that's bruising the church, he says, "Submit."

Peter gives three reasons why we're to submit to the government, even a government that's oppressive. We might not like Peter's reasons and we might be tempted to find reasons why they don't apply to us. But I'm convinced that if this was God's will for Christians in the first century under a godless and brutal government, it's still God's will for us as Christians in the 21st century.

Here's the first reason to submit to the government:

1. Christians are to submit to the government for the Lord's sake (vs. 13).

Submission to the government is first and foremost an act of obedience to the Lord. When we obey the laws of the land, we're actually obeying and fearing God. To resist the government is to disobey God.

You might be wondering, “How could God ask us to obey oppressive and anti-Christian governments?” That’s a good question. And I have to admit, if I didn’t have the teaching of the Bible, I’d come out at a different place. But I’ve decided to accept and believe what the Bible teaches. It teaches us that God ordained government (Rom. 13:1), that God raises up kings and takes them down (Isa. 45:1), and that God will judge the nations that forget Him (Ps. 9:17-20). The Bible even says that God sometimes uses heathen nations to carry out His purposes (Hab. 1:5-11).

Still, I don’t know why God doesn’t get rid of all bad, secular, and anti-Christian governments in the world. But this I do know. Even if the government is godless, we’re to submit to the laws of the land for the sake of the Lord.

Having said that, there is a situation where we must disobey the government for the Lord. The Scriptures are clear about this. When the government asks us to go against the clear commands of God, doing what the government asks us to do would be the wrong thing.

You might remember the three Hebrew children in Daniel 3. They were commanded by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow down to a golden image he had set up. They refused, knowing that the penalty would be death. But they said to the king, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up (Dan. 3:17-18).”

Or maybe you remember when Peter himself was told by the Jewish leaders not to teach in the name of Jesus. Peter, the one who wrote the verses we’re looking at today said, “We must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).” There are times we might have to make a choice between what God tells us to do and what the government tells us to do.

I’m finding that the matter about the separation of church and state more and more challenging. On the one hand, the state is saying that God can’t be in the public square. We can’t pray in school and we can’t have the 10 commandments in courtrooms. The Christmas holiday has become the winter holiday. Even the Easter bunny is in trouble. He’s becoming the spring bunny. At the same time, they’re passing laws that affect how the church runs its business.

For instance, hiring laws. I’m all for hiring laws. But when we hire a pastor, we’re not supposed to ask him questions about his personal and family life. Yet the Bible tells us that the platform for ministry in the church is a pastor’s family life (1 Tim. 3:4-5). When I interview a candidate for staff in this church, I’m going to ask him or her about his marriage and family life. At some point, you have to go with the laws of a higher government—the kingdom of God.

But most of the time, there’s no real conflict between the laws of God and the laws of government. So Peter tells us to submit to the government for God’s sake.

Here’s the second reason we’re to submit to government:

2. The government’s role is to promote good and to limit evil among its citizens (vs. 14).

According to verse 14, part of the responsibility of government is to promote what is good and prevent crime. There seems to be a universal sense about the big issues of right and wrong among civilized people. For instance, somehow we know that murder and robbery are wrong. Romans 2 tells us that the laws of God are written in the conscience of the human heart. So most governmental laws reflect what’s decent and good among human beings. They write and enforce laws that keep order and prevent chaos.

The Apostle Paul is more explicit about this than Peter. In Romans 13, he says that the government is a minister of God for good. If we do what’s right, we have no reason to fear the government. But if we do wrong, the government has authority to punish a person to the point of death (Rom. 13:1-4). That was God’s plan for government.

But we live in a fallen world. As a result, the government doesn't always do a good job of promoting good and punishing evil. And sometimes people in the government itself become corrupt. But the good thing in America is, the laws are still pretty much the way God intended. The government still punishes law breakers. We now have more inmates in the United States than ever before, 2,135,901 as of December 31, 2004. And it still holds its leaders accountable to the law. Mayor Filippi had a trial regardless of what we think about the outcome. But the government is so busy dealing with the accused and criminals, it doesn't have the time and resources to praise those who do right.

Another problem we have with government in a fallen world is that it doesn't really recognize its relationship with God, that government is instituted by God and that it exists to uphold righteousness. We used to understand this in America. But the truth is, most governments of the world have removed God from their governing process. And they don't have God's moral law on their agenda. I mean, look what's happening on the marriage front. Who would have dreamed 50 years ago that people of the same sex could be legally married?

It's the job of the government to promote good and to punish criminals. It's to keep order functioning among human beings so we don't destroy each other. But don't count on the government to legislate sexual and ethical morality. That's the job of the church—to spread the gospel so that the hearts of men and women are changed from the inside out. Laws can't do that. Regardless, Peter tells us to be good, law-abiding citizens.

I try to obey the law and I have a healthy fear of the law. When I get pulled over, I start to tremble. A few years ago, I had a group of guys from Grace in my car on the way to a Promise Keepers rally in Pittsburg. A cop pulled me over on I-79. I had no idea what I did. But it really rattled me and I got very talkative and cooperative. I wanted to know what I did because I didn't want to make the same mistake again. I wanted to obey the law. And besides that, I didn't want to be out a lot of money. The moment of truth came—ticket or no ticket. Some seconds of suspense. I knew the guys in the car were praying. No ticket!

The second reason to submit to the government is to understand its God-given purpose and to cooperate with it. The government exists on God's behalf to deal with lawbreakers and to give law abiding citizens a good life within the confines of the law. When we submit to the government, we obey the law. When we obey the law, it goes better for us.

Here's a third reason to submit to government:

3. Law abiding Christians will make an impact on those who dislike them (vss. 15-16).

The Bible is clear about this. Not everyone is going to like what Christians believe and do. Jesus said that (Lk. 6:26; Jn. 15:20). And so did Peter a few verses later on in this chapter. As a result, sometimes, Christians will be targets of oppression. It's happened in every century since Christ.

It's also true that some people will accuse Christians of doing wrong. Christians in the Roman Empire, for instance, were accused of criminal acts like treason and conspiracy. But Peter says, "Regardless of what others think about you, always do right. Don't break the law." Why?

First of all, it's the will of God, verse 15. It's God's will for Christians to obey the law and do good even when the government is not friendly towards them. Just because Christians feel the heat from those who oppose them, it's no reason not to do good. And second, when Christians do what's right, it will have an impact on those who dislike them. Peter says that it will silence or literally "muzzle" those who are foolish enough to oppose Christians.

Doing what's right is not an ironclad promise that everyone will be silenced who doesn't like Christians. People who hate Christians may still rail against them as they put them to death. It simply means that when people who oppose Christians continually see good behavior even under adverse circumstances, it will be very hard to prove an accusation against a Christian for wrong doing.

You see, the testimony of godly behavior when suffering is undeniable. The greatest illustration of this is Jesus. He never sinned. He never broke the law. He obeyed it implicitly. Yet people accused Him of all kinds of things. But He kept on doing what was right. As He died, Christ silenced the ignorance of foolish men. A centurion at the cross exclaimed, "Surely this man was innocent (Lk. 23:47)." The only recourse Christians have with those in power who oppose them is to continually do good things and hope that they'll see a difference that will profoundly impact them.

Well, what kind of right things should we be doing to silence our critics? It's not just that we obey the law, it's that we do things no one expects us to do. I don't think there's a stronger manual in the world for doing what's right while being mistreated than the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus in Matthew 5-7. He goes through a whole series of right things to do when we're mistreated. If we'll but follow Christ's words, we'll shut a lot of mouths. But what's sad is—there are few Christians who truly practice what Jesus taught there. We've found ways to excuse ourselves. So we're not silencing very many mouths.

I want to say one more thing about doing good. It's never right to do the wrong thing for the right cause. Many people in the world think that Christians are weird as it is. So when Christians stand for something good and do something wrong or stupid, it doesn't silence the ignorance of foolish men. It gives them more to talk about and ourselves a black eye.

I lean towards the right when it comes to morality. For instance, I believe the Bible teaches that abortion is murder. As a Christian and a Christian leader, I'm going to work within the law to make a difference. It's wrong to blow up abortion clinics. That doesn't silence critics. People who do that make all Christians look bad.

And I'm not here to criticize Pat Robertson. But several months ago he said we should do something very unchristian and obviously against our text today—assassinate Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. That didn't silence un-believers. It set their mouths on fire. The whole Christian community suffered as a result. We must be very careful not to say or do what's wrong even for a right cause.

In verse 16, Peter strengthens his argument just a little more. He reminds his readers that since they've come to Christ, they have a new freedom. They're no longer bound to the Law of Moses. They've been freed from sin's slavery. They have new liberties in Christ they've never known. But Peter says they're never to use that liberty as a reason to break the law and do what's wrong. The freedom we have is best used to become slaves of Christ to do His will. And the will of Christ is to go about doing good (Acts 10:38) under the government that's over us, the very thing Jesus Himself demonstrated.

Conclusion

Regardless of the kind of government we live under, Peter tells us that we're to submit to it at every level and always do what's right. The only exception would be to disobey the law in order to obey God.

In verse 17, Peter closes this paragraph with a four-part summary of what he said in his little letter so far—be respectful to everyone, show special love to fellow Christians, fear God's power to discipline us, and be respectful to the emperor or the president. That last one about the emperor summarizes what we talked about today—Christians are to honor and show respect for the government and submit. So let me close with six suggestions about how to apply what we learned.

1. Don't speak about government officials in disrespectful ways. Christians are good at violating this. Remember who was emperor when Peter wrote this? Nothing good could be said about Nero. Yet Peter told them to honor him. Peter is not asking that we agree with or condone what politicians do. But let's pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1-3) and let's not disrespect them when we speak about them. As Christians, we're not to be Clinton and Kennedy bashers. I haven't always set the high road here.

2. Look at government policy with a critical eye but with Christian grace. There are some wrong and unfortunate laws and policies. The war in Iraq is becoming more and more problematic. But whatever we think

about the policies and issues of our government, we can't abandon Christian grace and conduct. We must watch our attitudes, our words, and our actions.

3. Try to influence the government. Write letters to our congressmen. Make phone calls. Sign constructive petitions. Take jobs in government. Run for office. Some-body's going to influence the laws. Why not let it be the 88,000,000 million people who call themselves born-again Christians in this country?

4. Don't disrupt the love of the brotherhood, that is, our love for fellow Christians, over politics. One of the things that causes me concern is how Christians tend to divide over party lines. It's wrong to judge or dislike other Christians because of the way they vote. We're not to think less of them. We have freedom in Christ to have different opinions. But I've seen a lot of Christian fellowship disrupted in churches over matters concerning the affairs of this world's government. Let's love each other regardless of our political differences.

5. Realize that God is not partisan. God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat. I think it's wrong to believe that God supports one party more than another. He's going to put the party He wants in office anyway. The truth is—God can work through a pagan government. That message is huge in the Bible. God is above partisan politics. His goal is to take over all the kingdoms of this world and institute His own righteous rule in the kingdom of God. I can't wait!

6. If for conscience sake you must disobey the law, disobey in a way that honors God. Should the day come, and I think it will in this country, that we must obey God rather than the government, do it in a godly way. The only God-honoring way I know to do what you believe to be right with a gentle spirit and a Biblical explanation. That's what civilly disobedient believers did in the Bible. There's no room for angry, indignant, and self-righteous disobedience. Smuggle Bibles if need be. But if you get caught, honor the king and behave like a Christian.

Well, how's that for some practical application on a very sensitive subject? I praise God that He doesn't tell us what we want to hear through Peter. Rather, he tells us to glorify God by obeying whatever government we live under.

Now let me close with a question for you to chew on. If you lived in the days of the war for independence from England in 1776 and you were a Christian, what would you have done if you were going to obey Peter's teaching in the text we looked at today? Give it some thought this week.