

“Live as People Who Are Free”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 2:13-25; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Those Christians receiving this letter from the Apostle Peter are aliens in their own land. They have been displaced from their homes by a decree from the Roman emperor Claudius several years earlier. As elect exiles, beloved by God, and members of Christ’s church, Christians of the diaspora in Asia Minor are to consider themselves as the New Israel. In God’s sight, believers in Jesus compose a chosen race, a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, and holy nation dwelling within the midst of the civil kingdom. In the first half of 1 Peter 2, Peter exhorts these Christians to keep their conduct honorable before the Gentiles persecuting them, so that those who speak evil of them will be forced to give glory to God. In the last half of chapter 2 (vv. 13-17), Peter instructs these elect exiles how to view the civil magistrate which oppresses them. Then, in vv. 18-25, Peter instructs those Christian who are slaves and servants, how to respond to their masters. If Christians are to live honorable lives before the watching Gentiles, they must have a proper view of the civil government. As for those who were bound to their masters—the large caste of slaves in the Roman empire, many of who were Christians—they are to serve their masters and follow the example of Jesus, who, more than all men, suffered unspeakable injustice and humiliation.

As we continue our series on 1 Peter, we take up the second half of chapter 2. At the end of chapter 1, Peter gives three imperatives to those believers whom God caused to be born again, who already have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, and who are set apart (sanctified) by God for obedience. These imperatives are Peter’s exhortation to fix our hope upon Jesus (v. 13), to live holy lives which reflect the holiness of our creator and redeemer (vv. 14-16), and to live in the fear of the Lord, because the one we invoke as our Father is also judge of all the earth (vv. 17-19).¹ The practical implications of these commands are spelled out in the next section, vv. 1-12, of chapter 2, which we covered last time.

Peter implores his readers/hearers to set themselves apart from “*all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.*” To prepare themselves for action (as Peter exhorted his readers in verse 13 of the first chapter), Christians should see themselves as “*newborn infants, [who] long for the pure spiritual milk,*” of God’s word. Christians are to realize that their struggles arise because of their identification with Jesus, who was the rejected foundation stone of Israel’s messianic kingdom, but who is the foundation of a spiritual temple composed of all those who have been delivered from their sins by the blood of Jesus, and who are identified as a New Israel by Peter using a number of images taken directly from the Old Testament. Peter encourages his struggling readers to consider their identity as “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*”

The way in which persecuted citizens of heaven demonstrate to the watching world around them that they are the people of God has nothing to do with distinctive clothing, diet, or in a withdrawal from society—typical of most world religions (and even some forms of Christianity). It is the doctrine Christians profess—that we are believers in the Triune God who sent his son to save us from our sins—as

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos, 1:13.

well as the lives which we live before the unbelievers around us. This life of holiness is to be lived by obeying the three imperatives Peter gives, and as he exhorts his readers in verses 11-12 of chapter 2, “*beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*” In our text, vv. 13-25 of 1 Peter 2, Peter will flesh out two of the ways in which elect exiles keep their conduct honorable: Christians are to submit to the civil authorities (even those who persecute them), and Christians of low social standing (slaves and servants), are also to submit to their masters.

There is very some important historical background which will enable us to understand why Peter raises the particular points which he he does. The cultural institutions which Peter covers in this section (civil government, slaves and masters, and then husbands and wives—vv. 1-7 of the next chapter) were part of the so-called “household code” of the Greco-Roman world, a code which goes back perhaps as far as Aristotle. The “household code” defined those mutual human relationships which made up the Greco-Roman world of the first century.² These codes were unwritten, yet were universally understood by the Greeks, Romans, and even Jews, to be the way in which people conducted themselves in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. These codes reflected the social mores of the period.

God has spoken directly about these matters at various places in his word, and these codes are part of what we now call natural law, things which Christians and non-Christians have in common in the civil kingdom. These include: a proper understanding of civil authority (government), the relationship between slaves and their masters, and the relationship between husbands and wives. While holding these things in common with the pagans, Christians have a different take on the household code because Scripture explains how God’s people are to understand these human relationships in light of God’s revealed will in his law. Peter gives instructions to elect exiles in these areas so as affirm that Christians too acknowledge the Greco-Roman household code, while at the same time indicating where Scripture challenges and corrects pagan distortions of God’s revelation in the natural order.³

As we take up Peter’s discussion of how Christians are to relate to the civil magistrate, in verse 13, Peter commands his readers “*be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme.*” This command (the first of four imperatives in this section) may come as a shock to many in Peter’s audience since those human institutions to which Christians are to be subject, include the current Roman government and its institutions (i.e., regional governors) then persecuting them.

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul says much the same thing as Peter does here, the Roman government and its Caesar, including Nero—who later would put Peter and Paul to death—is a minister of God, whose purpose is to keep the peace and civic order and to provide for the common well-being of its citizens. All such human institutions derive their authority from God, which is why Christians are to respect and submit to them. Yet, Christians subject themselves to these institutions knowing that those who rule over them are likewise accountable to God for their actions. The command for Christians to submit to Caesar is always to be balanced against Peter’s words in Acts 5:29, to the effect that when Caesar commands us to do something which is a violation of God’s revealed will, we must “*we must obey God rather than men.*”

² Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos 2:13-3:12.

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos 2:13.

If Christians are to be subject to legitimate human institutions (i.e., those things spelled out in the household codes as interpreted by Scripture), Peter starts with the emperor (the king) whose human authority is greater than all others. Christians submit to the king's earthly authority (i.e., in the civil kingdom), because Jesus is Caesar's Lord. It is for this reason—Jesus command to us to do so—that we submit to the highest civil authority in the land. But Caesar delegates the daily rule of the empire to others. So, in verse 14, Peter spells out we are to subject ourselves, *“to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”* Local Roman government was exercised through governors appointed by Caesar in the various provinces which made up the Roman empire. The most famous of these governors was Pilate, who ruled over Judea in the days of Jesus. The elect exiles are to obey the governors of the various provinces of Asia Minor, even though these are the same authorities who confiscated land from Christians (others as well) and awarded it to retired Roman soldiers, displacing many in Peter's original audience.

The God-given purpose of these governors is defined by the Apostle—to punish evil doers and reward those who do good. This is a mirror image of Paul's comments in Romans 13:3, *“for rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval.”* The purpose of civil government is to restrain evil-doers and promote good order. This is a vital, and yet modest purpose. Using these texts from Paul and Peter, some Christians have argued for the divine right of kings, while others have argued for a Christian theocracy, or for various utopian ideals—but these texts, in my opinion, do not carry that much freight. The apostles do not give us a Christian theory of government in these texts—but they do tell Christians to submit to the government they presently have. Both apostles specifically say that government's purpose is to punish evil doers and protect those who behave themselves as law abiding citizens. The implication is that governmental authority is established by God, but then limited by God to a specific purpose.

In Romans 13, Paul says those who obey Caesar's laws need not fear punishment. In verse 15 of 1 Peter 2, the Apostle says when Christians obey Caesar, *“this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”* Good citizens are a good witness to the truth of the Christian faith, especially when Christians were considered to be rebels by the Romans, because Christians refuse to worship Roman gods (including Caesar) and will not participate in civic ceremonies in which pagan temples were dedicated, and where Roman gods were invoked and worshiped. If Christians honor the household code by affirming the legitimacy of Caesar's rule in the civil kingdom, even if they could not regard him as a god to be worshiped, Christians could effectively counteract the charge they were rebels who rejected all government authority.

The application of Peter's words come into play today when Christians are considered by our contemporaries as hateful bigots because we think homosexuality a sin and that gay marriage is an offense to God, as well as a complete rejection of natural law (as well as the traditional American “household code”). Since we can neither condone nor support gay marriage, Peter would tell us that we do much good in the civil kingdom by defending traditional marriage, in part, to silence foolish people who have no clue, nor care one whit about the long-term consequences of same-sex marriage upon our society, because they are seeking instead to justify their own sinful and hedonistic behavior.

In verses 16-17, Peter may be answering the objection which some will raise, namely, that if we are free in Christ, why do we need to submit to those governing officials who persecute us, take our homes and

property, and accuse us of all kinds of things because we will not worship Caesar?⁴ I think it more likely that Peter is addressing the attitude Christians should have when their heavenly citizenship collides with their responsibilities in the civil kingdom. In other words, Peter's not responding to an objection people were raising, but giving these elect exiles their marching orders. He tells them, "*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.*"

In light of the social mores of the age (as spelled out in the household code), Christians, who are servants of God, are to live as people who have been set free from the guilt and power of sin, because they have been set-apart by God and have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus. Peter's readers possess a heavenly citizenship (and therefore a certain freedom from sin and its power) which is as real as their Roman citizenship. But this does not mean that Christians have no responsibilities in the civil kingdom. On the contrary, Peter says, Christians are not to use their freedom in Christ associated with their heavenly citizenship as a license to sin or indulge the ignorance and passions of the flesh—especially when the pagan Gentiles are watching them. A Christian's conduct is to be honorable, so that the pagans around us see us as good citizens and that the accusations made against Christians have no merit.

Christians are to honor others, whether that be those worthy of honor, as well as those who may not be. You don't make faces at governor when he rides by in his chariot. You don't yell out that he's a pagan bound for hell. You honor him because of the office he holds—it is ordained by God. In fact, Peter says, Christians should honor (i.e., show respect) to people of low-standing, like slaves, widows, orphans, the poor. Christians are to love the brotherhood—their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and to do so in such a way that non-Christians notice. Christians are to fear God—remaining reverent of him, honoring his name (not taking it in vain), especially in public. Christians are to even honor the pagan emperor who sees himself as a demi-god and accepts worship. He is, after all, someone whom God has placed in authority, yet someone whom God will judge very harshly if he misuses his office, or is cruel to the defenseless, or uses his power to attempt to bind the consciences of God's people, especially if he seeks to repress Christians from worshiping God as revealed in his word. Simply put, Christians are to be good citizens, knowing that Caesar himself will give an account to God on the day of judgment.

In verse 18, Peter changes subjects to another important element in the household codes, the relationship between servants and their masters. The term Peter uses (*oiketēs*) refers to a household servant. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world was not raced-based as in ante-bellum American slavery. The slaves or servants to whom Peter is addressing were most often former prisoners of war, or their children, some times extending back generations. Slavery of this sort was universal in Peter's age, and constituted a caste or a social class—both the lowest and the largest in Roman society. If you were born to parents of the servant class, you were likewise a servant unless and until you were liberated.

How a slave lived, and under what conditions, depended largely upon who and where they served. Domestic servants, or those with education and administrative skills often lived as members of the families whom they served—and were sometimes treated quite well and given much personal freedom. Others were treated harshly. Generally speaking, laborers, agricultural workers, and unskilled women and children had a very difficult time of it—often living below the subsistence level with very short life expectancies. Many slaves had become Christians, so Peter must address the matter of how members of

⁴ Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 102.

this large social caste of servants were to deal with their masters—and by implication how Christian masters were to treat their own slaves and servants.

In verse 18, Peter writes, “*servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*” Under the Greco-Roman household code, masters had absolute authority over their slaves and servants and could treat them however they wished. In light of this, Peter explains how Christian slaves are to respond to their masters (even when they are cruel). In this text, Peter neither endorses this kind of slavery nor condemns it—it is a fact of life for many of his readers/hearers, and if Christian servants are called to be subject to their masters (even under difficult circumstances), Christian masters ought see the evil in the cruel and harsh treatment of their own servants and cease from it.

While there are principles here to be drawn for modern employees and employers, the analogy between Peter’s day and our own quickly breaks down because employment in our age is voluntary—if your boss beats you, or withholds your wages from you, you can quit and even have him (or her) arrested. Even better, you can say something terrible about them on Yelp or Facebook. Under the historical circumstances Peter is describing, the servant is bound to the master for life, unless emancipated. There is nowhere for an abused servant to go, and no legal recourse if your master is cruel. With this in mind, Peter tells all Christian servants to treat their masters with respect—good masters as well as bad.

Make no mistake about it, for the Christian servant, this kind of servitude is a genuine test of faith—the servant must trust God’s promise that they will be rewarded in the next life, and will receive a heavenly inheritance worth much more than any amount of silver and gold, while their wealthy (and perhaps cruel) master may face eternal loss and suffering. In verse 19, Peter points this out when he says, “*for this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.*” The blessing-curse principle comes into view here. God will bless those who do his will (if not in this life, then in the next), and punish those who do not. This is why, Peter says, those servants who look to God’s grace to sustain them during their earthly suffering will receive their heavenly inheritance in the next.

It is here that we run smack dab into the mysterious providence of God. Some Christians have easy lives and enjoy material prosperity. Some Christians enjoy good health, long life, and happy family relationships. Some Christians are masters, responsible for those under their care. Yet some Christians constantly struggle and find life very difficult. Other Christians face serious illness or die young. Still others are servants, bound to serve cruel masters. Peter directs those who are called to struggle in this life to look to the sufferings of Christ, because Jesus surely identifies with his fellow sufferers.

In verse 20, Peter writes, “*for what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.*” Those servants who are beaten because of their laziness or defiance of their masters, endure it. But to what end? Those who work hard and do not defy those in authority over them, will endure their earthly suffering with an eye to the future, when God’s grace to them will be fully realized. Christians know that on the last day, all wrongs will be made right, and recompense will come for all injustice. We are not to respond to cruelty in kind. Vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us.

In verse 21, Peter reminds Christian servants of the difficult truth, “*for to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.*” Peter make no attempt to explain why some have been called to such a station in life, he only acknowledges that some are. Struggling Christians, who find themselves victims of injustice must learn to look to a Savior who was also the victim of great injustice, and it is his example that Christian servants

must strive to follow. Making four direct allusions to Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (our Old Testament lesson), Peter describes Jesus as the supreme example for all Christians to follow in their dealings with those in authority over them (Yes, this is one place where the question, "what would Jesus do?" actually applies).

In verses 22-24, Peter says of Jesus, "*he committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*" There are several important points to be drawn from Peter's allusion to Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant.

First, Jesus' death was ordained by God. Yet in his sinless humility, Jesus he bore our sins upon the cross, thereby saving us from the wrath of God. Jesus' life was not taken from him, he offered it up freely, choosing to suffer and die for us and in our place. His unique office as Israel's Messiah and Suffering Servant means that his suffering and death is vicarious (for us and in our place), and thereby secures our salvation. Yes, Jesus is to be our example when God calls us to suffer, and/or when we face injustice from cruel tyrants and masters. But since we are sinners, our own suffering does nothing to secure or contribute to our salvation. There is no truth to the long-held doctrine (i.e., Dostoevsky) that the degree to which Christians suffer in this life is the degree to which we are purged from our sins and prepared for the possibility of entering the next. Jesus' death and suffering secures our salvation. Our suffering does not, and indeed cannot save us from our sins. But God will reward all those who endure difficult times, and whose faith has been stretched to the limits.

Second, in imitating Jesus' humility as described by Peter, we are effectively disarming those who abuse us—we give them no grounds to mistreat us—while at the same time we are pointing them to the humility and death of the only who can save people from their sins (Jesus). Peter's concern is not to give or explain the reason why we suffer, or why some have been called to be servants. Rather, the Apostle is concerned with the reality that his readers and hearers are already enduring. In speaking directly to them, Peter explains that looking to Jesus enables them (and us) to understand that when God calls his people to suffer or be mistreated in this life, he will certainly reward them in the next.

Just as God raised Jesus from the dead and then exalted him to his right hand after our Lord lived a life of humility, suffering, and rejection, God will do the same for his suffering servants. Since Jesus' life is a model to us in this sense, we must never lose sight of the fact that the empty tomb and exaltation of our Lord, followed his suffering and terrible agony of the cross. We live in a fallen world. Bad things happen to sinful people. Christ's death and resurrection is the pattern we are to keep in mind whenever we seek to imitate our Lord's humility, and when we undergo times of great trial and persecution.

Third, Peter instructs elect exiles to live, work, and suffer within the boundaries of first century household codes. The application is that Christians must respect the cultural institutions upon which a society is built (government, the relationship between masters and slaves, as well as that of husbands and wives), even when the pagans misuse and distort these institutions. We should be very thankful that in the providence of God we live in a representative republic, and not under the tyranny of a Christ-hating demi-god like Claudius or Nero. We should be thankful that slavery and indentured servitude is now seen to be a great evil, and that we live in a world in which we can choose our vocations and employers, be compensated for our work, and enjoy a very high standard of living. And although the modern world is now thoroughly secularized—our contemporaries have rejected both Scripture and natural law, as well as the entire legal history of Western Civilization, in allowing same-sex marriage, and tolerating

polygamy—Christians can still marry in the Lord, and live as examples to the pagans around us, just as Peter exhorts us to do.

Finally, in verse 25, Peter reminds his readers, “*for you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” In Adam, we are the sheep who have gone astray, and for whom Jesus voluntarily suffered so much. Apart from Christ’s mercy, we would remain pagans, free from the rejection and persecution we receive from being a follower of Jesus. Yet, at the same time, we would be without the hope that Jesus’ suffering for us, and in our place, delivers us from the wrath of God. Jesus humble obedience and sacrificial death, satisfies God’s wrath and anger and earns for us both a justifying righteousness received through faith and a heavenly inheritance.

Because of the imperishable seed of the word of God—giving us new life and a living hope—we are all now servants the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls—a master who will never treat us cruelly nor with injustice. Christians may be the object of Caesar’s wrath and scorn, yet are sheep in Christ’s pasture. As Christians we know that Jesus is Caesar’s Lord. Christian servants and slaves may find this life difficult because of cruel earthly masters, yet, because of Jesus, they can live as people who are free, knowing that their Good Shepherd can identify with them because he knows more than all men what it is like to endure pain and humiliation.

Beloved, in light of Jesus’ suffering for us, and with his example of humility in mind, let us therefore strive to *live as people who are free, not using our freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*”