

1 Peter 2:13–20

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. ¹⁵ For such is the will of God, that by doing right you silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but *use it* as bond-servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. ¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person endures grief when suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer *for it* you patiently endure it, this *finds* favor with God.

Godly Living in A Godless Era Daniel Cote

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We live in a world filled with evil and injustice, and it can be easy to get depressed and in a negative mindset about our circumstances. As I mentioned another time, it is easy to allow a "woe is me" Eeyore attitude to overtake us. You know Eeyore, the Winnie the Pooh character who always sees the glass as half empty. But the reality is that the world that Peter lived in, where Christianity had its birth and flourished, was far more barbaric and eviler than our present world. Therefore, the New Testament writers have much to tell us about Godly living in an evil world.

There are those out there who seek to discredit Christianity and the Bible by claiming that passages like our sermon text promote and condone the evil institution of slavery. Is that what Peter and the other New Testament authors are teaching? Those who condemn Christianity as promoting slavery know little about God's purpose in human history, which I have described in several previous sermons. Moreover, they know little of the justice of God and the love of God for the creatures created in His image. Furthermore, they know little of the leading role that Christianity played in abolishing slavery in the Western world. I will return to this topic in more depth this morning as we come to it in our text.

The term "Me" generation originally referred to the Baby Boomer generation and the rise of what some saw as the increased self-focus associated with that generation. It may have started in the 1970s, but self-realization, self-improvement, self-fulfillment, and hyper-individuality have been a growing cultural trend in the last 50 years. So, in the context of our current society, Peter's call to Christians to submit to every human institution is a radical message, but to spread the gospel, it was necessary, as we will see in a bit.

In Peter's case, the institutions were ruled by emperors, kings, and governors. Christians were to submit to these authorities for the Lord's sake. According to Peter, a prime role of human institutions is to punish evil. In our time, there are laws that we do not like, but there are also many laws that have been put in place for the common good and to protect us, and to promote a peaceful and harmonious society. The ultimate reason that we must submit to human institutions is that it is the will of God, as we see in verse 15. In this same verse, Peter continues to explain why it is the will of God. Peter says that by obeying the laws and rules of human institutions, we will do what is right, and in doing what is right, we will silence ignorant and foolish people.

Does that mean that Christians should go along with every law and rule instituted by human institutions? We always need to investigate the original meaning of the text for those who were receiving it. Many Bible commentators believe that Peter was writing before the severe persecution of Christians had begun. Peter wrote this first letter about AD 63. Just about a year or so later, Nero's persecution of Christians would begin. About four years after Peter

wrote this letter, he would be martyred in about AD 67. So, Peter was writing before the severe persecution of Christians began, and the trouble that Christians were facing was being slandered and falsely accused of doing evil. Although it would soon change, Christians still enjoyed the protection of the legal system, and by excellent behavior, they could silence their critics. The legal system approved of those who obeyed the law, therefore, obedience to the law kept Christians out of trouble and allowed them to focus on the things of God, glorifying God, and spreading the gospel.

The Apostle Paul says something very similar in Romans 13:1–2. Paul writes:

¹ Every person is to be subject 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.

Yes, it is true. God has established authorities on Earth. Unless those authorities require us to disobey God's moral code and biblical teaching, we must submit to governmental authorities.

In Romans 13:4, Paul says that rulers do not bear the sword for nothing, for they are ministers of God to avenge and bring wrath on those who practice evil. The proper role of the human governmental structure is to establish law and order that protects the people. So, God has established governments and authorities for the purpose of human flourishing. Moreover, in modern democratic societies, we have the ability to work to change laws that are unjust or inconsistent with God's moral law.

Governments can overstep their authority, legislating things that are contrary to God's commands. God's law supersedes human law, and when they are in conflict, we must follow God and the teaching of Scripture. In our Scripture reading from the Book of Daniel, we see an instance where Nebuchadnezzar made laws that were not about maintaining an orderly society. No, they were about puffing up his pride and causing people to worship his pagan gods and the golden statue he had made. It was probably Nebuchadnezzar's warped way of unifying his vast kingdom and controlling the masses. But Nebuchadnezzar's law was in direct violation of the first commandment, I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.

Thus, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego had no choice but to disobey the king. But notice how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego go about their refusal to obey the king. They do not incite rebellion against the king. They do not try to draw other people in to support them. They do not seek to embarrass the king or get other people in trouble. They simply stand their ground, placing God's moral law above manmade laws. In so doing, they glorified God and served as a good example for us of godly living in a godless era. They honored God, and God rescued them from the fiery furnace, as you will recall.

So, let's get back to our sermon text where Peter makes the point in verse 16 that we are to act as free people, but we are not to use our freedom for evil and sinful purposes. Christian freedom and the exercise of it must be in accordance with our Christian responsibility to obey God. God's people are free, and that freedom must not be used for evil purposes. God has given us freedom for the purpose of serving Him and glorifying Him. In verse 17, Peter calls us to fear God. Only a fool would not fear the being who controls our eternal destiny. However, God is not a tyrant but a loving Father to all who turn to Him. He tells sinners clearly in the Scriptures the path to reconciliation with Him. He sent His Son to save the world, who tells us in John 14:6, I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me. In Christ, we are reconciled to God. Apart from Christ, we are enemies of God. All praise be to God, who has revealed His plan of salvation to us with crystal clarity. There is no confusion of how to be saved for the one who knows the Scriptures.

But verse 17 contains more than what I just said. Peter also calls us to honor and love three groups of people. First, we must honor all people. We are to respect and value all people because all people are created in the image of God. If we want to lead people to Christ, we need to be Christ-like. Sometimes, Christians are quick to condemn and disassociate from worldly people. However, we can hardly expect those who do not know Christ to behave like Christ. Our job is to reflect the love of Christ to the world, that God will be glorified, in the hope that many will turn to Christ and souls will be added to the kingdom of God.

Second, we must love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must be keen to remember this, but I won't elaborate because I have mentioned this several times recently.

Third, we must honor the king, who, in our case, are the elected officials and offices of the United States government. Heck, it pains me to say this: We must even honor the IRS because it is a governmental institution. Now, I get it. You are probably not fond of our tax system. Work to change it if you don't like it. You have that privilege in America. However, as bad as you think aspects of our government might be, I suspect you would like anarchy a whole lot less than the government we have in Connecticut and the United States. So, we honor our governmental offices in the US and elected officials, and we work to change laws that are unjust and contrary to God's moral law.

As we come to verses 17-19, we need to address the issue of slavery in the Bible. Let me read those verses again.

¹⁷ Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. ¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person endures grief when suffering unjustly.

Critics, atheists, and skeptics argue that the Bible is pro-slavery and, therefore, cannot be trusted as a moral book. How will you answer them? Know this, slavery is despicable and completely repudiated by the Bible teaching that all humans are created in the image of God and the teaching of Jesus that we must love everyone as we do ourselves. No, the Bible is not pro-slavery, and we can be sure that God and Jesus do not approve of slavery. So, we need to address the matter so that our own faith and confidence in the Bible will not be shaken. Here are some important observations.

- First, the initial books of the Bible were written by Moses around 1500 BC, and by that time, human slavery was widely practiced in the ancient world. It was the cultural norm in the ancient world, and it was not inaugurated by the Law of Moses or the New Testament.
- Second, the heinous practice of race-based, humans-owning humans type of slavery found in the United States before the Civil War is typically not the type of slavery practiced in ancient Israel. The Greek word *Doulos* can be translated as slave, servant, or bondservant and often referred to people who had some legal and social status in the Roman world. Moreover, many slaves in the Roman Empire were prisoners of war who would have been slaughtered if not taken as slaves. I suppose in that context, it was better to be a slave than dead.ⁱ
- Third, in ancient Israel, the law allowed Hebrews to sell themselves as slaves to another Hebrew. But in the seventh year, they had to be released from their bond, as we read in Leviticus 25 because it was the year of Jubilee. In Exodus 21, we find rules for the purchase and treatment of slaves. In Israel, there were limits imposed on the use of corporal punishment. If a man struck his slave, and the slave died, the master's life would be taken. We see that a slave had the right to a wife and not to be sold to foreigners. Furthermore, they had the right to food

and clothing and could perhaps be adopted into families. In the nations surrounding Israel, slaves had no rights.

- Fourth, in the ancient world, you couldn't go to websites like Indeed to hire workers. Often, the master-slave arrangement might be an employee/employer relationship, and the slave became a member of the master's household. Abraham, for instance, had 318 trained men born in his household when he went to rescue Lot. These would have been servants and slaves who protected the household, tended livestock, and worked in the household.

In the New Testament, we find several passages saying that servants or slaves should be obedient to their masters. In Ephesians 6:5, Paul says something very similar to what we find in our sermon text. Peter calls servants to submit to and obey their masters, even those who are harsh. A large part of the early church was made up of household servants and slaves, and their work was to serve the needs of others. These servants and slaves who made up the early church would have been familiar and perhaps suffered unfair treatment.

You might ask at this point why Peter expects servants and slaves to submit when being treated unfairly. We find the answer in verse 19 of our text. Peter says that bearing up to unjust treatment and suffering finds favor with God. What in the world, you might say, how can unjust suffering on our part find favor with God? How can that be? Peter will explain further in the following verses after our sermon text. But here is a hint. Can you think of someone else who suffered unjustly for the sake of others? By His suffering and death on the cross at the hands of evil, unjust men, Jesus demonstrated the grace of God.

Respectful submission on the part of servants and slaves, and on our part when we are unfairly treated, demonstrates the grace of God exemplified by Christ, brings glory to God, and points others to God and his grace. Your Christian example in the world matters. It matters a great deal. Some preach sermons in words like me, but others preach sermons by the deeds of their lives.

When we collect food for the food bank, we demonstrate the grace of God and point others to God. When we collect items for Operation Christmas Child, we demonstrate the grace of God and point others to God. When we operate a diaper bank for the surrounding community, we demonstrate the grace of God and point others to God. When we send a missionary to foreign lands to be the hands and feet of Jesus, we demonstrate the grace of God and point others to God and salvation by grace through His Son that He poured out on the world.

Now, as I suggested earlier, critics and atheists would say that Jesus and the apostles should have taken on the great injustice of slavery. Let me digress for a moment. As a side note, I find it to be the height of hypocrisy that atheists condemn the practice of slavery as any thinking person rightly should, but they applaud and promote the destruction of the unborn through the practice of abortion up to full term. At the core of the argument of those who advocate choice in the matter of abortion is the belief that the unborn child is the property of the parents, like a car or a house, and so they are free to do whatever they like with it. But atheists and others rightly contend that slavery is wrong because humans can never own other humans. How is it then that atheists and the pro-choice movement don't condemn abortion because it treats human life as if it were the property of the parents? No human life is the property of another. Human lives belong to God. No parent has the right to destroy a life that belongs to God.

Back to the atheist's critique of Peter. Peter, they would say, should have condemned slavery and not instructed people to submit to it. Really? Which other injustices and atrocities should Jesus and the apostles have taken on? Here are some of the atrocities that were regularly occurring in the Roman Empire:

- 100 to 150 thousand people were put to death by crucifixion.
- Mass killings and genocide, including the killing of 450,000 Carthaginians in 146 BC.
- Torture and disfigurement of prisoners
- Bloody games and circuses where many people, including Christians, were brutally killed.
- Insane emperors who believed themselves to be gods and caused millions to suffer.

We live in a fallen, broken, and sinful world with depravity that stretches back to the Garden of Eden. If Jesus and the disciples had made it their mission to rectify all the wrongs in fallen human culture, we would have never heard the gospel. If Peter and Paul had challenged the Roman authorities on slavery and every other evil that could be found in the Roman Empire, they would have been crucified before the gospel had reached the ears of the people. If the gospel had never been heard, there would be no church. And without the church, there would be no people of God.

This is contrary to God's plan in human history, who, by the work of Christ on the cross, is building the church as a people for His own possession and who are zealous for good works. We read this in Titus 2:13-14 in previous weeks, and it is God's plan in human history that is playing out according to the wisdom of God. God's plan for humanity will not be hindered, frustrated, or stopped. Blessed be the Lord, for His ways are not our ways.

Jesus came to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom and to make atonement for the sins of the world. That was His primary mission in His three-year ministry on this Earth, and it rightfully was the mission of the first-century apostles and disciples to preach the gospel. You see, the apostles had bigger fish to fry. Only when the good news of the gospel was made known could men, women, and children turn to Christ and be saved by Him. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Jesus Christ that God saves souls and softens hearts to obey His commands and to follow His Son.

When the seed of the gospel is planted in a society, it germinates and grows, overtaking the sinful character and hearts of men and inclines them toward Jesus. Do you know when all those atrocities of the Roman Empire were abolished? It was during the Reign of Constantine the first Roman Emperor converted to Christianity in the early decades of the third century. The gospel works on the hearts of men and makes them see their evil ways.

Slavery has been abolished in the Christianized Western world, but it persists in parts of the Muslim world and in India, where the gospel is suppressed. ⁱⁱ When one becomes a true disciple of Christ, it cannot be denied that all humans are created in the image of God. Fifty-two of the 55 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Christian. They produced a document that contained words that have inspired generations with hope, reflecting that we are all created in the image of God. The founders affirmed these words:

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.

As Warren Wiersbe, the prolific Bible commentator, pointed out, "The Lord chooses to change people and society gradually through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the truth of the Word of God."ⁱⁱⁱ It took a while for the United States to abolish the heinous practice of slavery, but such evils cannot stand in a truly Christian society.

I will close with this. As humans, our natural inclination is to put ourselves first. It is very hard to deviate from that path, and we can easily fall into a life philosophy that we ought to make choices only on the basis of our self-interest. We are reminded today that the gospel

shows the flaws in human thinking and overturns them. A little phrase that is often used in instructing young children to be disciples of Jesus is, "God first, others second, me third." This simple six-word phrase is biblical and instructs us and reminds us of the true nature of Godly living in a godless era.

We must put God first in all things because Jesus instructs us that this is the greatest command, as He says in Matthew 22:37: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." We must put others second because Paul instructs us in Philippians 2:3 to "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves." If we put God first and others second, that only leaves one place for us, and that is third place or last. Do you want to bring glory to God, impact the hearts and minds of others and point them to Jesus? Put God first, others second, and yourself last. God's ways are not our ways. As high as the heavens are above the Earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways. God's way for humanity is God first, others second, and me third. If only we would follow God's ways, we would be truly blessed with peaceful homes, unified churches, and harmonious communities. May we yield to the will of God in all things. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-wrong-say-bible-pro-slavery/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thecollector.com/modern-slavery-places/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary*, David C. Cook, 2007, p. 245.