

Freedom to Be Subject

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[0 : 00] 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 this occasion. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil, and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. 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, dear God, honor the emperor. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So, we're in an interesting season as a nation.

It's a presidential election season. And this year in particular seems to be very divisive and caustic. So, on the one hand, we have Donald Trump and people who oppose him paint him as an egomaniac who is immature and incompetent.

[1 : 26] On the other hand, we have Hillary Clinton and then people who oppose her paint her as someone who is corrupt and unfit to lead our nation. Right. Right. And both parties, it seems to me, to be resolutely set against the other party, the other side.

And it seems like, I mean, if they're going to be elected, I don't know what's going to happen with these people. It doesn't seem like they're ever going to throw their support into this other party. It's a particularly caustic election cycle.

And in this kind of environment, especially we could ask ourselves, as Christians, how are we supposed to relate to the governing authorities, to the human institutions?

How, I mean, should we, what if someone that we don't support is elected and they seem to institute policies that we deem unconscionable, that we can't really get behind?

How are we supposed to then relate to the human institutions in the government? Do we say, well, forget this, since we're sojourners and exiles in this world anyway, let's not have nothing to do with the government and do our own thing?

[2 : 34] Or what's the proper posture as a Christian? And even though the Bible is a heavenly book that deals with spiritual matters, it also deals with things that are immediate like this, that has direct import and addresses how we are to relate in our everyday lives.

And this passage in particular addresses these questions in 1 Peter 2, 11-17. And what it tells us is that Christians ought to be subject to human institutions as servants of God.

So that's the two parts. And the way he teaches us this, 1 Peter, is that first he tells us how we are to be subject. So what does it look like to be subject to human institutions? And then second, he tells us why we are to be subject.

That's because we are servants of God. So Christians ought to be subject to human institutions as servants of God. And what does that look like for us to be subject to human institutions? Because we live in an in-between age, right, between the first resurrection of Christ and then the resurrection of the dead.

So we're in the in-between age where the kingdom of God has come, it has begun, but it has not yet been consummated and fulfilled. So we live in a world where good and evil coexist.

[3 : 47] So in that context, how are we to relate to and be subject to human institutions? So let's look at verse 11. It starts by saying, first, we are to be as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

That's the command from Peter. And the pair of words, sojourners and exiles, we've gone over this before, come from Genesis 23, 4, where Abraham describes himself to the Hittites as, I am a sojourner and foreigner among you.

And the idea behind this is that sojourners and foreigners do not have the privileges and responsibilities that are incumbent upon citizens. So they don't have to fulfill the same duties and they don't have, consequently, the same privileges.

And for that reason, foreigners are kind of looked at with suspicion. So, for example, even at just a very local level, if you were to be in a classroom and a new student comes, that student is going to face more scrutiny, not only by the teacher, but also by the peers, because they see, okay, well, if he's new, what is this person going to be like?

In the same way, when we have immigrants that come to our country, they are under greater scrutiny, because we say, what are these people going to be like? What do they believe? Do they hold the same values that we have?

[5 : 08] Right? So it's human nature to look with greater scrutiny on the people that are foreign and sojourners and foreigners. And in that context, the Christians, then Peter is telling us, we're sojourners and exiles as well.

And as people who hold to, have an allegiance to a different God, a different king, ultimate authority, we're going to also be looked at with some skepticism and curiosity.

And in that context, we're supposed to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against our soul. And if you remember from verses 14 to 15 of chapter 1, Peter had said almost an identical thing.

He says, So the word conduct and word passions, they both occur again here in verses 11 to 12.

And he seems to be getting at the same idea, right? He's saying, you know, you ought to be holy because God is holy, and you ought to live this way in a blameless manner so that you are not following the passions of the flesh as the rest of the world is doing.

[6 : 17] So there seems to be a contrast in the way Christians are supposed to live and the way the world lives. But there's an important twist here, because it doesn't seem to be setting the way we live up against the way the world lives.

Because if you look at verses 14 to 15, it says, And same thing in verse 12.

It says, Do you guys catch that? So what's parallel here is that the urging to, as sojourners in exile, to abstain from the passions of the flesh on the one hand, is parallel to living in honorably and doing good deeds, so that even the Gentiles recognize that and glorify God on the visitation, right?

So what's going on here then is not, Christian community is all good, and non-Christian community is all evil. And how Christians live is all good, and how non-Christians live is all evil.

Rather, Peter is assuming that there is some common ground. Because he's saying that the way you live, when you live and abstain from the passions of the flesh, there's the Gentiles, the unbelievers, are going to be able to recognize the good deeds that you do, and agree with you that they are good deeds, and glorify God on the basis of those good deeds.

[7 : 45] Did you guys catch that? Right? So that's an important twist that Peter is adding here. So he's saying that the way we live honorably, and when we live and do good, it's going to be accepted also by the norms of our society.

And this is a much more nuanced understanding of the way Christians relate to society than all the form and fray of the cultural wars would suggest.

And this is because it's not a binary category, right? So it's Christian good and society evil. So if you look at verses 13 to 15, Peter continues with this thought.

He says, Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governor as sent by him, to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Once again, Peter is not saying if you do good, you're going to be punished for it by the government. He's saying when you do good, you're going to be praised by the government, right?

[8 : 48] He's saying, And that doing those good things is going to silence people who are slandering us and speaking evil of us. And note the repetition of the word good. It occurs three times in verse 12, that they may see our good deeds, so that human authorities in verse 14 may praise those who do good.

And in verse 15, by doing good, we silence the slander of the Gentiles, of unbelievers. So if this is something that's a common ground, it's something that believers and unbelievers can agree on, that is good, then what is this good?

And it doesn't seem to me that what is good, considered good here, is a simple observance of the law, right? So being law-abiding citizens, and that is a good thing, but I don't think that that's the kind of good that Peter is referring to, because he says that the governing authorities are going to praise us for it, right?

Because governing authorities, human institutions, they don't praise us for just observing the law, right? I mean, you get a ticket if you speed, but you don't get a financial reward for driving at a speed limit, right?

I mean, that never happens. When you break the law, then you're punished, but you don't get praise for simply observing the law because that's expected, that's taken for granted. So this good that the government praises has to be something more, something that goes beyond a simple observance of the law.

[10 : 13] And I think what he has in mind is something that goes beyond mere observance and deserves commendation, deserves commendation from people. And so I was looking up some examples from our city, and in the 13th annual award ceremony of the Cambridge Police Department, they honored the employees of the 1369 Coffee House because they defended a woman who was getting attacked at Central Square.

So they received what they call the Citizen's Award. And so that's an obvious example of they're doing something that's commendable. That's a good deed that our human institutions praise, right?

So obviously it doesn't have to be something as dramatic and extraordinary for us. I mean, how often are we going to run into someone who's being attacked? But there's many things that we know our culture, our society also praises and approves of as good, right?

For example, volunteering at the food pantry of the East End House, like we've done, and like serving at Casper Emergency Services and Shelter to work with the homeless in Area 4 and drug addicts in Area 4, to volunteer for the annual cleanup day in East Cambridge, right?

All of these things are things that are commonly by unbelievers and believers alike as seen as good. And the government will praise us for these things. And this is a, it was particularly, it reminded me of the talk that I listened to when I was at the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization in 2010.

[11 : 45] Tim Keller was the speaker for this particular session. And he's kind of a, he's a pastor in New York City who kind of specializes in urban ministry. And he says that there's a drastic difference, cultural difference between the suburbs and the urban cities.

And that some things that you can, you know, just slip by and not have to emphasize, you don't have to emphasize in the suburban areas, you have to emphasize in the urban areas in order to get, succeed.

And he says, and he writes this, he says, the church in the urban cities needs to be famous in its care for the poor. If the city sees you only evangelizing and growing that way, they will assume that you're just out for power and money because you're just trying to increase your tribe.

But if the city sees you caring about the poor, caring about issues of justice in the city, they will say, well, maybe these people really are characterized by Jesus' love.

A good urban church is a church in which the neighbors around look at that church and say, I don't agree with many of the things they teach. In fact, some of the things they teach offend me, but I don't know what the city would do without them.

[13 : 00] If that church went away, we'd have to raise taxes because they're pressing so much value into the city. That's the kind of church we need to be.

And we have to become known, become famous for the good deeds throughout East Cambridge and throughout Cambridge and Boston. And instead of expending all our energy on the things that the world disagrees with us on, says these are bad things and these are good things.

And let's excel in areas where even the unbelieving world, the watching world will say, that is good. That is to be praised. That is praiseworthy. Keep your conduct among unbelievers honorable, he says, so that when they speak against us as evildoers, they may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

And this promises, it is such a promising thing that it gives us so much hope for evangelism as well because he says, what he's saying here is that if we are conducting ourselves honorably and if we are doing these good deeds that are praised, even by the unbelieving world, and we evangelize and share the gospel and bear witness in that context, then he's saying that the people will come to know God and as a consequence, on the day of visitation, which is the day of judgment, when Christ returns, these people will not be trembling in fear and condemned, but they will actually glorify God on the day of visitation because they would have, through our ministry, through our witness, through our good deeds, they would have been brought to a place where they can accept Christ and love God.

So that's such a wonderful promise that this passage has for us. And so this is how we are to be subject to human institutions, but what about other institutions?

[14 : 47] So if that's the way we're supposed to relate to the government, and are there only certain kinds of institutions that we're supposed to be subject to? And he says, be subject, in verse 13 to 14, to every human institution, right?

Whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governor as sent by him. This is a really challenging categorical command, right? It doesn't matter who, every human institution, be subject to them.

And this is reinforced in verse 17, if you go look at that. It says, honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the emperor, right? This is really just a kind of a recapitulation of what he has said, be subject to every human institution.

Honor everyone is the sociological dimension to all of the people around you, dimension. Love the brotherhood, that's the ecclesiological dimension, that's the church, right? And he says, fear God, that's the personal spiritual dimension, right?

And he says, honor the emperor, that's the political dimension. So what he's saying basically is, in every arena of life, be subject to human institutions. That's what God's commanding us to do.

[15 : 56] And conduct ourselves honorably and do good deeds. A Bible commentator, Robert Leighton, writes this, puts this in a really eloquent way.

He says, when a Christian walks irreprovable, irreprovably, his enemies have nowhere to fasten their teeth on him, but are forced to gnaw their own malignant tongues, as it secures the godly, thus to stop the lying mouths of foolish men.

So it is as painful to them to be thus stopped, as muzzling is to beasts, and it punishes their malice. And this is a wise Christian's way. Instead of impatiently fretting at the mistakes or willful miscensures of men, to keep still on his calm temper of mind, an upright course of life, and silent innocence, this, as a rock, breaks the waves into foam that roar about it.

So solid in our good deeds, in our honorable conduct, to break the waves into foam of all the criticism, of all the slander that roar about it.

But if that's how we are to be subject, obviously that begs the question, what if these human institutions are ungodly?

[17 : 16] Right? Because this passage assumes that the governors are sent by him to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good, but what if the human institutions praise those who do evil and punish those who do good?

Then how are we to be subject to these human institutions? In order to answer that question, we have to first answer the question of why we are to be subject to human institutions.

It says, Peter says, in verse 16, live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

So you'd think that the command to be subject would be rooted in our slavery, saying that, well, you are God, you are slaves, so just be subject. You have no choice. You're servile subjects of the human institutions, so be subject.

That's not the root, the grounding of his command. He's saying the root of our being subject to human institutions is not our subjection, it's our freedom, right? It's the fact that we are free people, and now we are servants of God and free people.

[18 : 27] That's why we are to be subject to human institutions. Not because these human authorities have ultimate authority over us, but because God has ultimate authority over us, and it's his will that we are to be subject to these human institutions.

And it's only those who are ultimately subject to God, the servants of God, that are truly free. Let me explain what I mean by that. Arthur Leff, who used to be a legal scholar teaching at Yale Law School, a couple decades ago, wrote this article called Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law.

And in it he writes this, says, In the presumed absence of God, the only available evaluators are people. Then, only a determinate and reasonably small number of kinds of ethical and legal systems can be generated.

Each such system will be strongly differentiated by the axiomatic answer it chooses to give to one key question. Who among us ought to be able to declare law that ought to be obeyed?

Stated that baldly, the question is so intellectually unsettling that one would expect to find a noticeable number of legal and ethical thinkers trying not to come to grips with it. If each person is a godlet, a little god, there is no room for a valid society.

[19 : 45] If each society is God, there is no space for individual freedom. Either God exists or he does not, but if he does not, nothing and no one else can take his place.

To illustrate at this point, you might fancy that as you're driving on the road, if there were no traffic laws, you know, that you'd be really liberating.

You know, you could go as fast as you want, you could run all the red lights, you could do whatever you want, that you would, you'd think that that'd be very liberating, but that is actually not the case. In fact, the precise opposite is true, because if there were no traffic laws, you would never know when a car in front of you is going to stop, when the car that's across the street is going to start going over your road, when they're going to, when they're going to change lanes.

If you don't know, there's no traffic laws to govern the traffic, then you would be in constant paranoia and fear, and it would cause destruction. There will be absolutely no freedom for anybody, right?

It's only when there's law-abiding drivers out on the road, and there's a clear law that governs everything that people do on the road, that you can truly be free, and you can truly drive. Without fear, right?

[20 : 56] In the same way, it's in society, unless we are subject to God and His rule and His blueprint for creation, because He's our creator, we can't live as free people, because if we set our own standards, and if everybody else set their own standards, this is how you ought to live, this is how I should live, if that's the case, then we'll be disposed to everybody else's whims and wills, and have no true freedom, right?

That's why only those who are ultimately subject to God, so that's why being servants of God is, it means that we're free. It's because we're servants of God that we are free, and Christians are these people.

We have been ransomed from our slavery to sin, so that we are now servants of God, and it's because we are servants of God, and it is the will of God, it says, that we're to be subject to every human institution, that we, not for our sake, not for the government's sake, but for the Lord's sake, as it says in verse 13, we are to be subject to human institutions.

And what's the purpose, verse 12, so that people will see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. We subject ourselves to human institutions for the Lord's sake, so that He would be glorified, not because we're ultimately loyal to, or subject to, earthly governments.

And this is what Martin Luther had in mind and wrote in his book On the Freedom of the Christian. A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none.

[22 : 23] A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all. We're simultaneously, as believers, subject to none, and subject to all.

We're perfectly free Lord, but perfectly dutiful servants at the same time. So that means we subject ourselves to human institutions not out of impotence, but out of our freedom that we have in Christ.

And so now that we know the reason why we are to be subject, so Christians ought to be subject to human institutions as servants of God. That's the reason. And that reason also qualifies how we ought to be subject.

Because if our ultimate allegiance is to God and not to human institutions, then when the government, human institutions, contradict what God would say and do, we have to agree with the apostles in Acts 5, 17-42.

Because they say after being arrested and charged not to teach in Jesus' name, they tell the Jewish authorities, we must obey God rather than men. And this truth has tremendous political implications.

[23 : 28] Because while it's true that as Christians, the Christian program for transforming the world, it's not politics, it's the gospel. That is true. But it's simply not true that the gospel is therefore apolitical.

Right? The gospel is profoundly political because it says, no, your ultimate allegiance is not to these authorities, it's to God. Right? And that's why we can't neglect involvement in politics, that's why we can't neglect involvement in social justice, that's why we can't neglect involvement in people's lives.

Right? Because God calls us to it. When Jesus ministered, he healed the sick. Right? And preached the gospel. Right? Both were expressions of his compassion for people. And it has to be the same for us.

And the challenge then for the Christian obviously is to decide where is our government aligned with what God is doing.

Where are the human institutions doing real good? And how can we get in line with that and do good deeds as even they see and agree with? But at the same time, to see where they disagree.

[24 : 35] Where are their values misaligned? And they praise as good what is evil. Right? And then to take a bold stance on those issues. Right? Theologians Os Guinness and David Walls says this is how that life ought to look.

He says, We are to live in the world in a stance of both yes and no. Affirmation and antithesis. Of being against the world and for the world.

This tension is crucial to the faithfulness of the church and to her integrity and effectiveness in the world. For the Christian faith is unashamedly world-affirming and has a peerless record in contributing to education, to philanthropy, to social reforms, to medicine, to rise of science, to the emergence of democracy and human rights.

And at the same time, the Christian faith is also world-denying, insisting on the place of prophets as well as priests, on sacrifice as well as fulfillment, on the importance of fasts as well as feasts, and on the place for exposing and opposing the world when its attitudes and actions are against the commands of God and the interests of humanity.

And that's why, if you remember from verse 11, Peter assumes, expects the gospel to be highly offensive to some pockets of the population. So he says, as sojourners and exiles abstain from the passions of the flesh, there's going to be passions of the flesh that's formed by the world that we need to abstain from.

[26 : 02] Yet he also expects the gospel and its implications to be highly attractive to people, right? Highly repelling and offensive, but also highly attractive to any pagan culture. So he says, they will see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

And if you look at our Christian involvement in politics today, especially in this country, you see two impulses, two extreme impulses.

And the first is to be really vociferously, you know, just set against the government and to just point out every place where we disagree.

And it's just very loud and there's a lot of clashing. And that's, and on the other hand, there's also, there are people who are really, they blend in so seamlessly that one, people never, never criticize them because they think that they agree with everything that they do and say.

The world thinks that these Christians agree with everything they do and say because they never say anything otherwise. They just blend in. And then secondly, they never give God the glory for how these people live because they are not living with reference to God in the way they do things.

[27 : 18] When they do these good deeds, they're not doing it out of reference to God and glorifying God as they do it. So these are, both extremes are excluded by this passage. It says, no, do good deeds, be attractive to those around you, right?

Do good deeds that even these people will recognize, even unbelievers in your society, in your neighborhood will recognize and give God the glory for it. But at the same time, when the society, when human institutions turn against what God is calling you to do, be bold, right?

Speak up, right? But with the recognition that it has to be in the context of these good deeds that our evangelism really bears fruit and these people will come to God to glorify God on a day of visitation.

And this is a hard command, obviously, that Christians ought to be subject to human institutions as servants of God. But this is exactly what Jesus did for us, right?

So it says, John 10, 17 to 18, says, For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I might take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

[28 : 31] I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I receive from my Father. So no one took Christ's life from him, right? No one forced him to lay his life down, but he laid it down, right?

Likewise, no human institution takes our freedom from us. They don't force us to be subject. But Jesus, just as Jesus did it because it was Father's will, so we do it because it is our Heavenly Father's will.

We subject ourselves to even human institutions. And it seems difficult to maintain this tension, but throughout the ages this is exactly what Christians have done.

And if you look at Christian history, historian Alvin Schmidt kind of points out some of these things in the book right there called How Christianity Changed the World. He says Christian influence in government and society was ultimately what led to the outlawing of gladiatorial games in the Roman Empire, the infanticide, right?

And the segregation later of male and female prisoners, right? This is all to the Christian influence. It's to the Christians' influence that the practice of human sacrifice among the Irish was abolished, that the practice of burning alive widows in India was abolished, right?

[29 : 49] It was because of Christian influence and how they lived out the gospel that the practice of binding women's feet in China also was abolished, right?

It was the Christian idea of, it was a Christian influence that led to the advance of education for children throughout Europe, right? And William Wilberforce, as you guys know about, led the charge to abolish slavery, right?

In the transatlantic slave trade. And even in America, they said two-thirds of the abolitionists were all clergymen, right? They led the charge throughout to good deeds that even the world saw as good and recognized and praised God for.

And that's how we ought to live. And so let's continue as a church in this venerable tradition, right? To be subject to human institutions as servants of God. With that in mind, let's pray.