

## **Week 11 - The Sojourning Citizen - 1Peter 2:13-17**

### **Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 29:4-7**

#### **Introduction**

The United States has been a nation of immigrants since its founding

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, English playwright Israel Zangwill applied the term “melting pot” to the society that was being formed via the cultural assimilation of immigrants to their new world home in those days

Today, what we have is more of a cultural salad bowl than a melting pot, as immigrants tend to cling to their home culture rather than assimilate

In fact, in 1990, then New York City mayor David Dinkins referred to New York as a “gorgeous mosaic” in praise of the diverse cultures that then made up the city

And the separation of immigrants has only picked up steam as we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century as today’s immigrants are distinguished from previous immigrants by the sense of entitlement they bring with them

Some immigrants cling patriotically to their former homes while others firmly adhere to the religious beliefs of their home countries and only submit to the laws prescribed by their faith

And some even go so far as to cordon off areas of cities and demand anyone who enters those places do likewise

Whether that is good, bad, or indifferent is a matter for sociologists to hammer out, and my intention isn’t to debate the issue, let alone settle it today

I bring it up because our passage this morning concerns how the Christ-follower should conduct themselves while they sojourn on this earth and specifically how they should relate to the institutions of this earth

Should we be like the immigrants of old and voluntarily subject ourselves to the laws and structures of this place, or should we determine that we are just passing through and therefore not accountable to be under earthly authorities

This is a critical matter for us as we Americans pride ourselves on independence and self-determination

After all, our nation was founded as the result of revolution, and I believe, if I were to take a poll that, I would find that most of us think that the American Revolution was a proper response to England’s corrupt authoritarianism

Thomas Jefferson certainly believed so as he even had a personal seal that bore the motto first coined by Benjamin Franklin: “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”

And Ben Franklin actually proposed having that motto engraved on the Seal of the United States

Defiance of governmental tyranny is part of our DNA

Peter’s original audience knew about living in a society that was inhospitable to Christianity

After all, when Peter penned this letter, Nero was the fifth emperor of Rome and was such a tyrant that he was declared a public enemy by the Roman Senate

As a result, he committed suicide which led to widespread rejoicing by the populace

But before all that, Nero set fire to Rome to clear the land for a palace he wanted to build and blamed Christians for it

Then, as punishment for a crime they didn’t commit, he coated some Christians with pitch and burned them alive to provide light for his outdoor parties and he was the ruler responsible for the executions of both Paul and Peter

It was in this environment that Peter penned his letter and wrote the passage we will be considering this morning

A passage that begins “be subject” or “submit” as some English versions render it

“Be subject” is the main theme of the section of Peter’s letter that goes from 2:13 through 3:6 and in the verses in front of us today, the focus is on being subject to governing authorities

So as we begin we will first set out to see what it means to **be properly subject** to human institutions

## **I. Be Properly Subject**

Look with me at verses 13-14 [**1Peter 2:13-14**] where Peter writes:

*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.*

When we read those words, "be subject," it's only natural for us to wonder what exactly means it means to be subject. It means to be submissive to an authority and carries with it the implication of at least some measure of obedience to that authority and, generally, one who is subject to another will act in obedience to the authorities.

Still, "be subject" is a milder term than "obey" and had Peter meant to say Christ-followers should always obey, he could have said so.

Many of us think of submit as a four-letter word even though it has six letters but that wasn't the case for Peter's original audience.

And while we think of submission or subjection as the state of being dominated and even to some degree humiliated, the Greek word Peter uses here actually means something considerably milder.

It does convey the idea that someone in authority can give orders that others ought to follow but Peter's original audience would have understood it to mean *to arrange one's life under the authority and guidance of another*.

The same terminology is used of Jesus in **Luke 2:51** when it says he was "submissive" to his parents after the incident when he was left behind at the temple.

And it's used three times in **1Corinthians 15:28** where we see the Son being subject to the Father.

Obedience is present in those examples but more importantly there is recognition of hierarchy and cooperation.

The person who is subject maintains a degree of freedom because they can still determine how and to what degree to follow or obey the leader to whom they are subject when they voluntarily put themselves in submission.

When voluntary, as is the case here, the act of being subject describes an attitude of willing cooperation.

And for the believer, submission to human authorities is always partial and dependent on what the authority requires.

We must not fail to take into account the phrase that follows the command "for the Lord's sake" because it gives us guidance and sets limits that govern our submission to human authority.

We submit because God wills that we do so but our submission can never be to anything that goes against his will.

In Acts 5, we find the account of when the apostles, including Peter, were arrested and jailed for preaching in Jesus' name.

And when the religious leaders commanded them to not teach in Jesus' name Peter and the apostles answered in verse 28 [**Acts 5:28**] - "*We must obey God rather than men.*"

That was clearly an act of civil disobedience on the part of the apostles against the authorities as they recognized that they could not be subject to the human authorities when the demands of society sought to override the will of God.

Still, we dare not endeavor to find the exceptions because the general teaching of Scripture is the submission of the Christ-follower to, as Peter puts it, "*every human institution*"

And unless we are quite certain that we are indeed living our lives in complete obedience to what God has commanded we will be found out and branded as the hypocrites we are when we only rebel against things we find unpalatable.

Then Peter points out that we make ourselves subject “*for the Lord’s sake*” because to do otherwise brings dishonor to Christ

And Peter deals with this subject here because what he has just revealed about the status of the Christ-follower could lead us to determine that we owe no allegiance to the world’s institutions

He has said that Christ-followers are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s people and he says that we are to live as sojourners and exiles who are just passing through this world

So he now hurries to say that our submission to the authorities and all human institutions of this world is an act that pays tribute to God’s authority over all those institutions

Notice that he doesn’t say “be subject to stroke the egos of those in authority” or “be subject because those in authority are worthy of it” or “be subject so you don’t get punished by the authorities” he says “be subject for the Lord’s sake”

Every act of submission can therefore be an act of worship because God has chosen to place even the worst authorities in the positions they hold because they are fulfilling some part of God’s purposes in the world

And Peter applies his teaching to all levels of authority

In our circumstance we could say that it extends from the president all the way down to local officials and bureaucrats

And he says that the government has two basic functions: punishing evil and encouraging that which is good

So, while we might disagree with the methodology or the direction of our government at times we must admit that government does some good and is far better than they anarchy that would take its place if it didn’t exist

Failures notwithstanding, even flawed government does much that is good and the threat of punishment of evil does prevent anarchy

So, even when we disapprove of a particular government official’s goals or methods and even when a government is corrupt, we must subject ourselves to it because God has ordained and established it

The result will be what Peter says next in verse 15 [**1Peter 2:15**]

*...that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people*

The Greek word for putting to silence conveys the idea of muzzling or gagging one’s mouth so as to restrain their speech

The ideal would be to completely silence those who would seek to condemn us as Christ-followers but an only slightly less desirable goal would be to suffer slander but, by living well, to have no one believe the slander

The world is filled with people who are ignorant, some willfully so, of God’s truth and therefore disobedient to God’s Word and they love nothing better than tearing down Christ-followers through finding fault and trumpeting it aloud

And Peter says they can be silenced when we do good - it’s much the same message we just saw in 1Peter 2:12 last week

How we live either gives our words credibility or takes that credibility away and that includes how we live in relation to our government -

If we are going to have an impact on the citizens of this world we need to be good citizens as sojourners and a big part of that is being subject to the governing authorities

But, it appears that some in Peter’s original audience were arguing from the position of their freedom in Christ that they were free of responsibility to human government so Peter addresses that next

## **II. Be Free Slaves**

Look with me at verse 16 [**1Peter 2:16**] -

*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.*

What Peter says here could be a little confusing as he says to live as people who are free as servants of God

We might rightly ask, "How can living as a servant of God make one free?"

What we need to understand is that Christian freedom doesn't mean lawlessness

The apostle Paul deals with this subject in Romans 6 and I encourage you to read that chapter in its entirety but we will look specifically at verses 16-23 this morning [**Romans 6:16-23**]

*Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.*

*For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The key to his argument is that a person is either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness - either way you are a slave  
Freedom isn't license to sin but the freedom to do what is pleasing to God

The kind of freedom that most of mankind talks about and chases after is the freedom from all restraint but that kind of freedom is actually enslavement to sin and mankind must still face the consequences for their actions

What the Christ-follower enjoys is freedom from sin not freedom to sin and yet it seems that perverting the doctrine of freedom was prevalent in the early church

As we have seen, Paul dealt with it in the church in Rome and he also did the same with the church in Galatia [**Gal. 5:13**]

But Christian freedom isn't freedom to do whatever we want; it's the freedom to be able to do what we ought

So Peter tells his original audience not to use their freedom as a cover-up or pretext to do evil but instead live as a bondservant of God doing the good that God wills

But, how does that command fit in with this teaching about submission to authorities?

Consider the difference between speaking out against the ills we see in our government and actually doing something proactive about it

By way of example, what difference would it make if evangelicals weren't only seen railing against the evil of abortion but actually taking steps to be pro-life?

What if rather than holding signs and protesting abortion Christians put their efforts into supporting those who choose to have their babies and struggle financially, emotionally, and relationally because of that decision?

What if, instead of being seen as complainers who rail against everything wrong about our government Christ-followers were seen as people who stopped looking to government and took action to bring about positive change?

Peter says if and when we submit ourselves to doing God's will and do the good that he has established for his servants to do, the ignorant mouths of foolish men will be silenced

We are to be subject to our governing authorities but that doesn't mean we have to be bound by them

Ours is not a slavish subjection whereby we are expected to be completely devoted to or dependent on our government

Rather we are to be proportionally submissive as Peter point out next in verse 17 [**1Peter 2:17**]

*Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

### **III. Be Proportionally Submissive**

Christ-followers are to be subject to every human institution and those who govern us but that submission isn't absolute

What we find in verse 17 are four commands that govern many of our human relationships and structurally we notice that honor comes both first and last with two other commands in the middle

And when we group the four commands into two pairs of commands we get the full thrust of the nuance that Peter introduces that controls the extent of the responsibilities in the different relationships

Let's consider the first pair: *"Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood."*

To honor someone means to assign a high status to them

We know all too well that some people are not honorable people and we may find others difficult to honor but God says we must honor them anyway

We are to show respect not just to the respectable but also to the disreputable and the despicable

We have to remember that, even when they display the vilest characteristics, all men have been created in God's image and are precious to him so to fail to honor them is, in reality, to dishonor God

So we are to honor everyone but then Peter amps it up as he gets more exclusive and he says, *"Love the brotherhood"*

This love is *agape* - to love unconditionally and sacrificially the way God loves

This isn't sentimental love or emotional love it's the obedient love of the will that desires the highest good of someone else

And Jesus said that this love would be a visible characteristic of his followers in **John 13:35** where he said:

*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

We owe honor to everyone but we owe love to our fellow Christ-followers

In the second pairing, Peter goes in reverse order but the idea is the same as he goes from the greater to the lesser

He says: *"Fear God. Honor the emperor."*

For the believer, to fear God isn't to live in terror of God because we have no reason to fear God in that way any longer "Fear God" means to revere God and make respect for God the pattern of your life

When we understand just who God is and what he values and what he hates and we see him as he truly is we can't help but regard him with the deepest and most profound awe

It's our fear of God in this way that is the basis for desiring and striving to do as he would have us do

And that fear is reserved for God alone - it's not for the "emperor" or those in authority over us

Peter lowers the bar when he comes to those in authority as he says *"Honor the emperor"*

We should honor those who are in authority as we honor everyone

James writes extensively in James 2 about the sin of partiality and that principle applies here

All people are worthy of honor simply because of their personhood and we shouldn't show more honor to the rich and powerful power any more than we should diminish or withhold honor from the poor and powerless

We are to honor all but love our fellow Christ-followers

And we are to be submissive or subject to human institutions as God-ordained institutions but we owe no person our blanket approval or our reverence because those are reserved for God alone

## Conclusion

Peter's teaching in this passage is easy to understand

It's remarkable that he wrote as he did considering that Nero was the emperor he was specifically writing about

But it only goes to show that if even Nero and the generally corrupt and authoritative Roman government are worthy of honor and submission then every government surely must also be included in this injunction

For Peter's original audience the message was clear enough but we might wonder how we should obey the passage given that we live under a completely different system

After all, we live in a representative democracy where we have a constitution that gives us the right and responsibility to choose our leaders for ourselves

And in our system of governance, we are told that we don't have to adopt every policy that comes down the pike or yield to every government scheme

We are invited, expected even, to get involved both individually and collectively and given the duty to assess how things are going and to act in our own best interest by petitioning our government for a redress of grievances

So, how do we apply this passage when our political order allows, even recommends, that we debate candidly about our disagreements and when we have the responsibility to choose and support honorable people for places of authority?

First of all, we should be praying for everyone in authority and asking God to give them wisdom so that they might act so as to bring him glory

But Peter's final quartet of commands also helps when it comes to how to deal with the people in power who we simply don't agree with

When our careful analysis reveals to us that we have to oppose a leader or their policies we should certainly vote against them and try to remove them from office at the ballot box

But can we also speak out against them and their policies while they are in office?

I believe the answer to that is "yes" but that we must do so while being respectful and showing them the honor they are due by virtue of being image-bearers but also because they have a God-given position of authority

As long as we show proper respect, we are free to point out their failures and why they should be opposed

I also believe that there are times when civil disobedience is called for although we must be willing to submit to the consequences of our actions should we engage in it like the apostles did in Acts 5

If our government orders us to go against a clear command of God we should respectfully refuse to comply

Because obeying God in being subject to human authorities is no excuse for disobeying God in other areas

Remember, "Be subject" is not the same as "blindly obey" and everything we do must bring glory to God

But we have to guard against allowing our preferences to be the standard that determines right and wrong for us and rebelling simply because our guy didn't prevail in the last election

This is a hard passage for many of us - perhaps most of us - especially in this polarized political climate

I admit that I was chastised in my study this week - perhaps you have been stung by our exposition this morning

Remember, you are free to disagree and even say so but you aren't free to be disagreeable because our first priority is to live for the Lord's sake and to bring God glory

Next week, we will continue the topic of "being subject" as we look at the responsibility of the Christian employee

Let's pray

**Jeremiah 29:4-7 (page 656)**

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.

Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.