

“Free to Submit”

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It's a good thing to be forced into voluntary submission.

1 Peter 2:13-25

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The Greatest Freedom (Pastor Paul)

To start a conversation with an atheist with a bang, use this statement: “The best freedom isn’t freedom *from* authority but freedom *under* God’s authority.” If you bring it up to an unbeliever, they think that’s a ludicrous statement.

I have never seen an atheist go into a bank in a bad section of town and say, “I cannot go into this bank because I will not be subject to the armed guard there.” Notice how quickly they love to be under authority when they perceive that the authority is good for them or when it enhances their life and protects them.

Today we are talking about authority and about submission. Peter is writing during the time of Nero, one of the most infamous persecutors of Christians. Peter would say you may not be able to respect the man but respect the position.

In verse 13, Peter gives us his overarching point. Submission to authority comes out of a right place in your heart where you first submit to God. Paul would also reiterate similar sentiments in Romans 13. The first alliance that we have submission to and the first person we are loyal to, is the Lord. If we submit to him, then it follows that we should submit to authority.

The Greek word used in God setting up authority is *ktisis* which is similar to God’s creation. Peter is saying that the authorities have been placed there just like God has

created the world. God created the heavens and the earth, and he has created these positions of authority. It's not just by happenstance that they are there.

We do not always know the purpose of the things in God's creation. Sometimes, after the fact, we can say "That's why that was there." Instead of always second guessing and asking God why he put people in certain positions, we need to recognize that we don't know it all and that he does.

Verse 14 tells us about two roles God has set up for the state: to punish wrongdoing and to elevate good citizenship. You might ask, "But what about rehabilitation?" That's not the role of the state. That might be the role of the Christian. God has appointed the state to punish those that do wrong because punishment is the greatest deterrent because that's just how evil we are.

The reason the state is there is because some people need the fear of getting caught and the fear of punishment to stop them from perpetrating very evil acts. Those laws keep our culture in check. The state also elevates good citizenship because if the state encourages good citizenship, then that's beneficial for the entire state.

Verse 15 says, "It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you." Quite often unbelievers (pagans) are unaware of the spiritual motives behind why we do something. For instance, people cannot understand why Christians are pro-life. They might ask, "What's your business in carrying your thought into this person's life?"

You might ask them to sit down and read Psalm 139 with you so they can understand what we believe about what God is doing in a woman's womb and how God has purposely, correctly, and beautifully woven together a life. "If you could see that spiritual thing that is pushing me on." Quite often they don't want to hear it.

They may not always understand the spiritual reason you are doing things. Don't give them an outward reason because you are hateful or an absolute concrete reason to not like you. He says don't live that way. Live in a way that shames them because they can only be guilty of misunderstanding you not because of your actual guilt.

In verse 16, we find a juxtaposition between submission and liberty. Whenever I talk with couples that are getting married, I mention the word "submission." I then ask, "Is that a word that has a positive connotation or a negative connotation to you?" Mostly 75% say it's a negative connotation. Peter is telling us that it's not submission *from* all authority but the greatest freedom that we have is submission *under* God's authority that leads us to the greatest amount of freedom. Submitting to God's authority actually gives us the greatest freedom.

Peter is writing Jewish Christians who are scattered throughout modern day Turkey. They were familiar with the verbiage that is used here. In the Passover liturgy,

they would say “We celebrate coming out from underneath our old, cruel masters to our new, true heavenly Master.” They came out from oppressive, cruel masters to a Holy, Good, and Loving Master.

Peter is saying you are not free to do whatever you want. You are free to do what you ought to do. It’s a beautiful thing. We are not free to do as we like; we are free to do as we should.

Verse 17 is a beautiful expansion of what Solomon says in Proverbs 24:21 “Have brotherly love, respect the king, and fear God.” This deep word—brotherly love—only occurs twice in the New Testament. It implies a deep affection that is a familial love. There is a blood tie. The blood tie may not be a biological blood but it is the blood of Christ that bonds us together. That blood is even stronger.

But then he says, “Respect the king and fear God.” You may not be able to respect the individual that is holding the office but you respect the office that he holds. Notice that it says “respect the king” but the term of fear and reverence is only held to God. Whoever is in power, they are co-equal with you. They are of no more importance in this world in God’s eyes. You are co-equal with them in this world.

What about when the government does something we disagree with? What do we do then? Look at Daniel as he is carried off into captivity. He is a devout Jewish young man. The king gives a decree that these exiles, including these Jews, are going to eat this rich food. Many of these things were against the Levitical covenant of dietary things that a Jewish person could eat. Daniel didn’t stage a hunger strike or fight with anyone. He very respectfully called in the leaders without dishonoring them and proposed something to them so that his conscience may be kept clean. It was an act of civil disobedience but notice how respectful and how godly he was during that interaction. Daniel gives us a great idea of how you can still respect authority but ultimately fear the Lord (Daniel 1).

But Mode (Pastor Bob)

The words “submission” and “authority” put all of us in what I like to call “But Mode.” “Submit to all human authority,” Peter says in verse 13. Now in verse 18 Peter adds, “You who are slaves must submit to your masters with all respect.” Next week we’ll get to 3:1 where Peter says, “Wives, submit to your husbands.” In chapter 5, Peter instructs those who are “younger” to submit to those who are “older.”

With all this submission talk, I can almost hear the “Buts” through the camera. “But what about my rights?” “But you don’t know my boss.” “But nobody can do that.” I find it curious that Peter himself doesn’t go into “But mode” in this passage.

“Slaves” may not be the best translation in verse 18. For us, of course, it raises a much more tragic, abhorrent part of history that isn’t exactly the same thing as what

Peter is talking about. In other words, he's not defending slavery, especially not the transatlantic slave trade that lasted about four centuries in the northern hemisphere.

The word used here means "household servants"—think of the cooks and valets and butlers in Downton Abbey or Biltmore House. They are told to "submit to your masters with all respect" whether they are "kind and reasonable" or "cruel." In other words, don't let their behavior dictate yours. Regardless of how they act, Peter says, "Be subject...with all respect." In other words, "Submit—and keep submitting."

Then he offers three reasons for this unnatural behavior.

First, submit to reflect God's grace. There are a several ways to translate the first part of verse 19 and the last part of verse 20. I like the simplest and most literal. The issue is unjust suffering, which will come up later in 1 Peter because all of his readers are in that boat. No kudos for hanging in there if you were punished for doing the wrong thing. But what if you didn't deserve it?

"*For this is grace, if someone endures patient suffering*" (19). "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, *this is grace from God.*" Nobody said returning evil for good is easy. But then again, that's what God did for you. Reason number one is grace.

Second, submit to look like Jesus. Peter, like Paul and every other New Testament writer, wants you to engrave a cross on your glasses or contacts—invisible to others, but the lens through which you see everything else. You can never come back to the cross too often. We regularly remember what Jesus did for us not only because his death paid for our sins but because his death changes literally everything.

In verses 21ff., Peter says Jesus is "your example, and you must follow in his steps." Sometimes Christians speak of Jesus' sacrifice as if being an example is the only reason Jesus suffered and died. It's not the only reason, not even the most important reason, but it is one reason he went through what he did.

When we ask, "What would Jesus do?" we need most often to go back to the cross. In the matter of submission, what did Jesus do? Mostly quoting from Isaiah 53, Peter gives you one Jesus example after another. Let's start with his perfect innocence. You think you never did anything to deserve what happened to you? He goes on. He didn't retaliate. He didn't threaten. He trusted the Final Judge. He even bore the sins of those who crucified him. He healed the wounds of those who wounded him.

Peter says, "If you ever find yourself complaining you are being treated unfairly, look at the cross. If you ever say, 'I don't deserve this,' stay at the cross before you make your next move."

Third, submit because he's got your back. You were wandering way off course, but you've come back now and you have a Shepherd and an Overseer. Shepherds

provide. Overseers oversee. In chapter 5, Peter will talk more about the role of leaders in the church, whom he calls shepherds and elders. For now, he wants you to know that the same Jesus who suffered for you is not only watching carefully but deeply and personally caring for you. You can trust him.

It's this same Jesus who says—joined by all the key Jesus-splainers in the New Testament: If you have truly submitted to me, submit to the authorities I have placed in your life. You say, "But...." And he says, "Shhhh. No Buts. Learn from me."

Biblical and beautiful (Pastor Bob)

Submission to authority is an essential biblical value. If you have a problem with submission, you have a problem with Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, and Peter—at least. You really should question your view of the Bible's authority and perhaps even your faith if you say, "I don't submit to anyone." The heart of the gospel requires submission to Jesus, who submitted to the greatest injustice in the history of humanity and did it on your behalf. The Son submitted to the Father in unjust suffering, and he invites you into that same life of yielding up your rights.

With that settled, I do think there are some legitimate "Buts."

But what about other Scriptures? I can think of so many other places in the Bible itself where Peter's seemingly absolute rule about submission isn't followed. Joseph didn't submit to his employer when she tried to seduce him. The Hebrew midwives didn't submit when they were told to kill the babies. Jesus infuriated the moneychangers in the temple. Most relevant to this letter, Peter himself was told not to talk about Jesus and answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Peter is not giving an absolute statement for all situations. Then why does he say it so strongly here? Remember, he's writing to a small minority viewed as a new religion in a very hostile society. There's even a possibility Peter's letter will fall into the wrong hands. If I were writing a letter to a group of Christians meeting secretly in Saudi Arabia, I would say, "Lay low. Get along. Submit."

Related to this is the "But" about historical rebellions—the Protestant Reformation, the American revolution, the Nazi resistance, and the Civil Rights movement. All of those were seemingly validated in hindsight, but don't turn the exceptions into the rule. In the Bible, submission may not be the only consideration or the last consideration, but it ought to be the first and primary response of the heart.

But what about democracies? Do I have to submit to a President or a Governor I didn't vote for or don't like? Is he saying we can't resist the government or speak out?

My cynical comment is, "If you'd rather live in the same situation as those first century Christians, go live in China or Iran." That's closer to Peter's readers.

More seriously, when Peter says, “Submit to the king,” he’s saying “Submit to the system you’re in.” Who’s ‘king’ in a democracy? The people are. The constitution is. The rule of law is. In our context, submitting to “the king” means that you do engage the political process. You advocate, you speak up, you vote, you use the court system appropriately. Christians can and should be actively engaged in a democracy.

Submission in a democracy, however, doesn’t remove the requirement to treat with honor and respect those who are duly elected. Whether or not you voted for them, the people elected them and we need to pray for them and honor them. It’s a sin to show disrespect to any human authority. Some of you have been around long enough to have heard this story, but when Bill Clinton was President he took a nasty fall down some stairs and injured his leg. Our middle daughter, then 12 years old, heard the news. Knowing her parents weren’t exactly Clinton fans, she exclaimed, “Ha!” She still remembers that I made her sit down and send President Clinton a get well card. I blame myself as much as her that she had somehow learned from me that it was OK to rejoice that harm had come to him. It’s not.

But what about abusive relationships? This is a tough subject for a number of reasons. First, the definition of “abuse” is broad, and varies from culture to culture. We don’t have time to delve into that.

Here’s the important thing. Biblical submission is never about the misuse of power or privilege. It’s not, “I’m a nobody so I have to submit to the Great Power over me that’s better than I am.” Nor is it about a stronger demanding compliance from a weaker. When Peter writes about submission, he is saying that you submit because you know who you are, not because you’re sniveling as a nobody.

The principle of submission absolutely does not give permission to abuse a position of power and privilege. It’s those who are weak and insecure who have a need to dominate and manipulate. Those who know who they are don’t demand their own way. They don’t need to be right or to surround themselves only with those who submit to their power and authority.

To his readers who find themselves in a vulnerable place with little control, Peter has spent a chapter and a half setting up this teaching. His readers are “chosen” by God (1:2). They have “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade” (1:4). Even though they have not seen Jesus, they “love him” (1:8). Together they are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1:9).

This principle is also why we don’t counsel victims of domestic abuse or workplace harassment to remain passively and quietly in those situations. Marriages are stronger when both partners are strong and secure. A man who demands that his wife submits is not following the teaching of the New Testament. More about that next week. For this week, it’s more about the workplace and the government. You submit not out of weakness and insecurity but out of knowing who you are in Christ.

But what about the Pandemic? I cringe a little when someone asks me or offers their own thoughts on what God is doing in this pandemic. Why did God cause this to happen? That's way above my pay grade.

I'd rather talk about some of the lessons I hope we'll learn through it. One of them is submission. The opposite of submission is the need to control. Is there anyone on the entire planet who hasn't had to admit in these last two months that we're not in control? Start with President Trump. There's a lot he would love to have controlled. Just yesterday our governor was overruled, at least temporarily, by a federal judge in respect to church services. Pastor Bob started out with a rather defiant attitude toward the whole social distancing thing. Employers and employees in every line of work have had to pray the Serenity Prayer, learning to "accept the things I cannot change." I suspect within the 24/7 walls of your togetherness at home, there have been a lot of lessons about mutual submission.

The one thing I want you to take from this message today is that it's a good thing to be forced into voluntary submission. Peter prefaced this whole section on submission this way: "Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world" (12, *The Message*).

Submission is not only biblical, it's beautiful. If you have to be in charge to have your own way, nobody's going to ask, "What makes you so delightfully different?" You're just like the world. If your mantra is, "That's not fair! I deserve better treatment than that," nothing about that stands out.

When you find yourself in a situation where decisions have been taken out of your hands, the world asks, "How can I get more power or better treatment?" The Christian asks, "What makes Jesus more intriguing and attractive?" The Christian submits to authority not because we're forced to, but because we're free to.

This is a turbulent time, and Christians should absolutely be engaged in the public forum about how to handle the pandemic as it relates to public safety, church gatherings, personal freedoms, and more. As a leader with a relatively small area of responsibility, I have a lot of empathy for President Trump, Governor Cooper, and every business, civic, and church leader. We truly are facing situations that none of us ever expected to face in our lifetime. We need a lot of prayer and humility.

For individual Christians, the overarching question should not be, "How can I get my own way?" But "When I've said whatever I'm going to say, will I make Jesus more attractive?" In our interactions in person or on social media, or even, yes, when we engage the political process, will people say as they hear us or read us or see us, "That had to be the grace of God"? I pray it will be true of me and of you. Amen.