

Politics in Exile (2:11-17)

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to 1 Peter, chapter 2. If you're with us for the first time this morning, we are spending a few months digging through the book of 1 Peter, which is a letter written to followers of Jesus living in the first century Roman empire. And the central idea in the letter is how followers of Jesus should relate to the world around them, especially when the world around them doesn't *share* their values or beliefs. Peter spends the bulk of his time just helping his audience understand how to live well in that type of cultural climate. And in the first week of the series we talked about how, even though their situation might seem different than ours on the surface (they had it much rougher than any followers of Jesus in America do today), there is still plenty we can learn from the ideas Peter lays out. So today we're continuing in that.

In *today's* passage, Peter is going to start turning his attention to some really *practical* ways we are to go about all of this. Beginning with this passage, **he is going to speak into really specific arenas of our lives and help us think well about each one.** So for all my pragmatists in the room, who have been wondering when we were going to start bringing these ideas down to earth, you have *arrived*, my friends. But *briefly*, before he gets into the first major application, he does give us one big picture *principle* to guide us along the way. So take a look with me in 1 Peter 2, starting in v. 11:

[11] Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. [and here's the principle...] **[12] 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.**

That right there is sort of the “commander’s intent” of most everything that follows in 1 Peter. **The overarching goal is that we as followers of Jesus should live “honorable” lives.** That word “honorable” could also be translated “beautiful” or “attractive.” So we should **live such compelling lives among those who don't follow Jesus, that even if they are tempted to accuse us of things, they are instead won over by how we live.** And the hope is that God would use that whole process to draw more and more people to himself. That's what that whole “day of visitation” bit is referring to. That probably sounds weird to us, but all Peter seems to be saying is that God desires to work through us living these types of lives to draw people to himself, by the

time we all meet him face to face one day. So **that's the *big idea***, and for the next **handful of weeks, we're going to unpack some specific *applications* of that big idea.**

And specifically, the application we're going to cover *today* in the *rest* of this passage, is **how followers of Jesus should relate to government, governing authority, and political figures of their world.** Which means that *today*, I get to talk about *politics*, during an *election year*, in a room full of people who are all over the map politically and socially. *Lucky* me, right? Every pastor's *dream*. So some of this is about to get *interesting*. But, that's where the text leads us, so we're going to follow it there. So are you ready? Are your seatbelts buckled?

Alright. Here's how we're going to break this down. We're going to draw out *what we should do*, *what that doesn't mean*, *what motivates it*, and *the purpose of it*. I felt like I was doing too many three-point teachings lately, so today I really mixed things up and did *four*. But that's how we'll break things down today. First...

What we should do

First, Peter describes how we *should interact* with those in power and authority within our government. Take a look with me in v. 13:

*[13] Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to **the emperor as supreme**, [14] or to **governors** as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.*

So Peter writes to these first century followers of Jesus, and encourages them to “be subject to” both the *emperor*, as well as those sent to govern on the emperor's behalf. Now the phrase “be subject to” means very much what it sounds like. It carries the connotation of *obedience*. So Peter is insisting that you and I as followers of Jesus, on some level, should be *obedient* to the government and governing authorities of our day.

Now *that*, for many of us, raises all sorts of questions and maybe even *pushbacks*, doesn't it? Questions like, *well what if those authorities are **unjust**? What if they're **corrupt**? What if those governing authorities make things that are **immoral** for us as followers of Jesus, legally **mandatory** to do? Or, what if the authorities make things that are **mandatory** for us as followers of Jesus, **illegal to do**?* In those scenarios, are we still called to “be subject” to them? To many of us, this instruction might sound like a

really unhelpful blanket statement upon first listen. So before we go any further, let's clarify what this *doesn't* mean, and then we'll circle back around to clarifying what it *does* mean. But first...

What it *doesn't* mean

There are a couple things that “being subject to” the governing authorities *can't* mean. It *can't* mean “**absolute obedience to.**” **It doesn't mean that we *always do exactly what the government and governing authorities tell us to do, even when those things are unethical or immoral or unjust.*** It *can't* mean *that*.

I *know* that because **in other parts of the bible, God's people deliberately defy governing authorities in order to obey God.** I'll give you just two examples: one from the *Old Testament*, and one from the *New*. First, there's the story of the Hebrew midwives in Egypt. So for those of you reading through the bible with us this year, you might recall the story about Pharaoh (the governing authority at the time), who ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill every baby boy born to the Israelites, as a sort of population control measure. But these midwives deliberately *disobey* that command from Pharaoh, and it tells us that God showed them *kindness* as a result.¹ So **there we have an example of God's people deliberately *disobeying* a government leader, and God blesses it.** You following that?

Here's the other one. In the early days of the Church, recorded in the book of Acts, the leaders of the church would often get in trouble with the authorities for talking publicly about Jesus. And so at various points, they would bring in the disciples, and tell them to stop doing that. And *one* of the times this happens, the disciples (one of whom is actually *Peter*) respond by saying “whether it's right in God's eyes to listen to you or listen to God, you'll have to decide. But spoiler alert: we're going to tell people about Jesus.”² **So *there, we have another example of God's people deliberately disobeying what the governing authorities tell them to do.*** So all of that to say, Peter telling us “be subject to” governing authorities *can't* mean *absolute obedience* to everything they decree and prohibit. After all, Peter himself did not do that. So that's one thing it doesn't mean.

Second, and this one will be a lot quicker, “**be subject to**” *can't* mean “**silence in the face of injustice.**” When our governing authorities or *any* governing authorities do things that are clearly immoral or unjust, “being subject to” them doesn't mean we *refrain*

¹ You can find this story in Exodus 1.

² You can find this story in Acts 4.

from speaking out. That would put us in violation of pretty much everything found in the prophetic books of the bible. In those books, **God's people are consistently called to always speak out in the face of injustice, no matter what the ruling authorities allow or don't allow.**

But the other reason is because of what *Jesus* did on a regular basis. **Jesus regularly and aggressively called out ruling authorities of his day on their injustices.** Like a *lot*. So to say we can't speak out against injustice would mean *Jesus* went about this in the wrong way. So, "being subject to" the governing authorities can't mean *that* either.

So this all leaves us asking the question, what *does* it mean, then? What *does* it look like to "be subject to" the governing authorities? Well based on this passage, I think we could summarize it like this:

When it doesn't contradict things the Scriptures clearly teach, honor the authority of the governing bodies in our society.

In other words, Peter saying that **when it comes to *neutral* things—things that we may like or dislike—but things that are not moral, right-and-wrong issues for followers of Jesus, we should make the effort to *honor* the governing authorities over us in society.** So just to list off a few examples...we *pay taxes* when the government tells us to *pay taxes*, because that's not a moral or immoral issue. We carry *auto insurance* when the government tells us to carry *auto insurance*, because that's not a moral issue. We abide by the legal drinking age (or at least we *should*), because the government has put that law into place. There's nowhere in the *Bible* that says you have to be 21 to drink, but that's the law that is in place by our government, so we abide by it. *Another* one that is very relevant *right now* is that, if our government tells we need to suspend our Sunday Gatherings to prevent the spread of Coronavirus, we will *do that*, because that's a way of honoring the governing bodies over us. Those are the types of things Peter has in mind for followers of Jesus—that when it comes to *morally neutral* things, we should *honor* the governing authorities in our society.

Peter elaborates on this a little *more* at the *end* of our passage, in v. 17. Here's what he says there:

[17] Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

So here, Peter sets up two different *contrasts*. The first contrast is between how we interact with “everyone” and how we interact with “the brotherhood.” He says that we should “*honor* everyone, but that we should *love* the brotherhood.” In other words, **our posture towards all human beings, regardless of who they are should be to show them *dignity* and *respect* as fellow image bearers of God.** According to the Scriptures, *every human being* bears God’s image, and therefore is worthy of dignity and respect. And so Peter is affirming that here. He says we should *honor everyone*.

But *then* he says that we should *love* the *brotherhood*. For other *followers of Jesus*, our posture should be not *only* to treat them with dignity and respect, but also to actually *love* them: to regularly sacrifice *our* good for *their* good, to care for them in concrete, tangible ways. Now that doesn’t mean we *shouldn’t love all people*—it just means that there is a distinction there: **there is sometimes a difference in the dynamic between how we treat all people, and how we treat other followers of Jesus.**³

But then, returning to what he’s been discussing earlier in the passage, he draws out *another* contrast. He says we should “*fear* God, but only *honor* the emperor.” Now here’s what’s interesting about *that* statement. In Peter’s day and age, an emperor wasn’t just a powerful political office like our *presidency* is today. It *was* that, and *then* some. **Most of the people living in the Roman Empire at the time believed the emperor was either a god or a demigod. They believed he was *divine*.** In fact, one of the emperors around this time period had a *temple* constructed where people could go and *worship* him as a god. And if you know much *world history*, this is actually a pretty common tactic among world leaders. If you want to elicit fear and obedience from people you rule over, one of the easiest ways to do that is to claim that you are a god (or at least that you’re *connected* to the gods in some way). And that’s often what emperors did. **So the common view of the emperor in Peter’s day wasn’t just that he was *powerful*—it was that he was *divine*.**

And into that type of political and cultural climate, *Peter* says, to followers of Jesus living *under* such an emperor, “*fear* God. But only *honor* the emperor.” Are you beginning to see how *subversive* of a statement that was for Peter to make about the emperor? **Peter says to those who are inclined to *fear* the emperor, who are inclined to *worship* him as a god, “no, don’t do that.”** ‘Only *God* is worthy of your fear and worship—an emperor *isn’t* worthy of that.’ He isn’t a god—not at all. He isn’t a god—not at all—and you shouldn’t treat him as one.

³ See also Galatians 6:10.

But on the *other* hand, he tells his audience that they *are* required to ***honor the emperor: that they are to treat him with the same dignity and respect that they would show any image bearer of God.*** He is still worthy of *that*. That was important for him to say because many people back then, and we think even some followers of Jesus, *knew* that the whole “worship the emperor” thing was a sham. They knew it was just a ploy to intimidate people. They knew it wasn’t legit, and so they would trash the emperor every chance they got, undermine him every chance they got, sometimes even conspiring to help assassinate the emperor. And so Peter is saying to *those* people, “no matter how much of a sham you feel like the emperor is, no matter how corrupt you see him as being, no matter how much you personally disagree with his actions, he is still an image bearer of God. And therefore he is still worthy of being treated with dignity and respect.” **Peter says that followers of Jesus shouldn’t *worship* the emperor, but that they also shouldn’t *despise* and *trash* the emperor. They’re called to an altogether different response because of their faith in Jesus.**

So, all that said, let’s see if we can bring that approach into our current cultural climate a little, shall we? This is where it will get fun. And by “fun,” I mean “controversial” and “offensive.” It would not be a stretch at all, I don’t think, to say that when it comes to *our* current *president*, there are also two “*camps*,” so to speak, just like there were back then. And they’re actually strikingly *similar* to the two camps of Peter’s day, with a few very minor differences.

We have one camp in our country who is passionately *pro*-Trump, and quite honestly, at times, seem like *they* believe Trump can do no wrong. Especially if you look at how eagerly they jump to his defense at all times. People who say things like, “he’s the best president we’ve ever *had*, he stands for Christian *values* (whatever that means), and he has single handedly rescued our country from its imminent descent into liberalism.” And the assumption that is made by a lot of the people in this camp is that anyone who doesn’t *like Trump*, must just *hate America*.” That’s *one* camp.

And then you have *another* camp of people who say “wait, no—Trump is *evil*. He’s a racist, he’s a bigot, he’s a misogynist, he’s a horrible person through and through, he’s an *idiot*—and therefore we should use every opportunity and every social media account we have to tear him down, trash him, and badmouth him.” And ***most of the time, at least currently, these two camps just yell and argue back and forth at one another, call the other camp names, and make an already divided society even more divided.*** And unfortunately, all of that in some ways has gotten even *worse* in the middle

of this whole Coronavirus ordeal. Even global *pandemics* are now politized somehow. But that, more or less, is the situation we find ourselves in in today's society.

So the question, is how should we take the *instructions* of 1 Peter and apply them into all of *that*? How would *Peter* speak to both of these camps? Well to the first camp, the very pro-Trump camp, I think he would say *something* like this: you are *allowed* to be a Trump supporter and a follower of Jesus (if I'm losing you already, just hang with me for a sec). That is *allowed*. You're allowed to like and appreciate some of his policies that you think are good for America and good for the world. You are permitted to do that as a follower of Jesus.

But *listen*: Trump is *not* Jesus. He is not the savior of the world (even if he does borderline *claim* to be at times). He is not our *redeemer*, he is not our *rescuer*. **He is a flawed, sinful human being.** And *because* he is a flawed, sinful human being, he has said and done quite a few harmful, damaging things to people and groups of people in our country. And he *continues* to say and do those things to this day, and most of the time, does not even seem all that sorry about any of it. And ***if your support of Trump as a president prevents you from calling his sin sin, prevents you from calling immorality immorality—if it prevents you from calling injustice injustice, you have just revealed that your allegiance is actually to Donald Trump and not to Jesus.*** And that is the incorrect decision to make if you are a follower of Jesus. Are you following me so far?

Okay. But just to make sure I offend *everybody*, and just to make sure I complete the circle Peter makes in this passage, I also need to say this. To the *other* camp—the very *anti-Trump* camp—I think Peter would say this: you're *allowed*, as a follower of Jesus, to *disagree* with Trump. You're allowed to think he isn't a good president for our country. You're allowed to be bothered by aspects of his *character* that you find destructive and blatantly inconsistent for anyone who *claims* to be a Christian. You're even allowed to *speak out* when Trump says destructive and harmful things, and call them for what they are. In fact, I would say you actually *should* speak out when those things happen. You're permitted to do *all of that* as a follower of Jesus.

But, if at any point, your disagreements with and distaste for Trump lead you to treat him as something less than an image bearer of God, that is not okay.

Scripture tells us as followers of Jesus to guard our hearts against malice and bitterness and wrath towards *all people*. **You do not get a free pass, just because Trump is the president, to say things about him that you would never ever say about any other**

image bearer of God. For example, it is *never* okay to call another human being “worthless.” I don’t care who they are. It is never okay to call another human being “despicable.” Do you know what “despicable” means? “Worthy of hatred and contempt.” It is never okay to imply that another human being is *irredeemable*. Because **if you do those things, that means you have allowed hate and bitterness to form your heart more than love.** And that’s the exact *opposite* of what we are called to as followers of Jesus. Are you following me on *that*?

Okay, let me just add this and then we’ll move on. I am fully aware that saying things like I just said may ruffle a few feathers, on *both* sides of the aisle. **I’m aware that there might be some of you who never come back to City Church because of that.** I realize that. And can I just say, I pray you *won’t*. I pray that you stick around, and you do the hard work of sorting through your heart in all of this and you allow us to walk alongside you as you do that. That’s what I *hope* you do. But if you’re just not *interested* in doing *that*, and you’d rather leave and find a church that is more accommodating to your political preferences, you’re welcome to leave. Because **if you’re bothered by me saying that we should call sin *sin*, and me saying that we should treat *all* people as image bearers of God—if being asked to do those two things *bother* you, you weren’t gonna make it around our church for very long anyway.**

But Peter *insists* that we find a different way forward that doesn’t *idolize* our governing authorities, and doesn’t *demonize* them either. Peter says that walking in that *tension* is what it looks like to live faithfully as *exiles* in the world we call home. This is what that looks like.

And specifically what he’s going to get into next is *what enables us* to approach it that way. In other words...

What motivates it

So let’s ask the question, *why* should we take this posture towards the governing authorities in our world? Peter gives us *that* answer in v. 16:

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

So Peter says what enables us to take this posture within our society is that we are, in his words “free.” Now whether you’re Democrat or Republican, that’s one of the best

words ever to American ears, isn't it? *Freedom*. That's what we live and breathe around here. But right after mentioning *freedom*, Peter goes on to unpack what *freedom means*. And it might be the most counter-intuitive logic ever for an American when it comes to freedom: he says that **our freedom is given to us so that we might serve** (and even *become subject to!*) **others**. That's usually not how we tend to think about freedom, is it?

I remember growing up, we had a line that we would use. Anytime someone would tell us to do something we didn't want to do, we would respond with something like, "I don't have to do that. It's a free country—I can do whatever I want to do." Any of y'all remember that? When I grew up we'd say it all the time: "it's a free country, I can do whatever I want to do." And whether you've heard that expression or not, I think it very much sums up our default understanding of freedom: we assume that freedom is about "doing whatever we want to do" and not having to answer to anybody.

But what Peter is getting across here in our passage, and what I need for all of us to understand here today, is that for a follower of Jesus, that is a very *incomplete* understanding of freedom. Freedom, according to Peter, is given to us *so that we might* "live as *servants* of others." *Paul* actually says something very similar in Galatians 5:13. He phrases it like this:

*For you were called to **freedom**, brothers. Only **do not** use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love **serve one another**.*

So this is somewhat of a *theme* in the Scriptures. As followers of Jesus, sure, we are "free." But that "freedom" is not a freedom to "do whatever we want" or to serve *ourselves* and our own *desires*, but rather a freedom *for the purpose of serving others*. So anytime you hear a follower of Jesus say "I'm free to do whatever I want—I don't owe anything to anybody!" all the red lights on your dashboard should go off. Because they've actually misunderstood the purpose of their freedom. Freedom is given to us that we might *serve* others. That we might willingly—not under compulsion, but *willingly*—take the posture of servants to those around us. That includes other followers of Jesus, other people we come into contact with, and *even* governing authorities that we may not particularly like. It's actually our calling to use our freedom to *serve*.

Jesus demonstrates this more than anybody. Jesus was the *freest* human being to ever live. He was free from all sin, all vices, all addictions—he was totally and completely *free*. And yet he says about himself in the gospels, "I came not to be served, but to *serve*, and to give my life as a ransom for many." **The way that Jesus chose to exercise his**

freedom was by offering up his very life for all of us. Jesus, because he knew precisely who he was and how free he was, *chose* to take the posture of a servant. Knowing his *high* status enabled him to voluntarily take on the *lowest*. And we as his followers are called to do the same: because we know who we are, we can become servants to all. And Peter says that we are to take that posture, even towards the governing authorities of our day.

And it's actually through us *doing* that that Peter says people in our world will encounter Jesus. So on that note, lastly let's look at...

The *purpose* of it

What is the end goal of all of this? What is it that we're trying to accomplish? Take a look with me at v. 15:

*[15] For this is the will of God, that **by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.***

So the goal of us taking this posture towards governing authorities is **so that we might silence any unfair accusations against us.** You've got to remember that at this point in history, when Peter writes to these followers of Jesus, they are this brand new, fledgling sort of movement in the world. People were confused by them. People didn't *understand* what they were about. They were *thrown off* by how the Christians lived. And because of all that, just like other misunderstood groups of people in the world, they were often treated with suspicion and hostility. So often, people would launch uninformed accusations against these followers of Jesus.

So Peter is telling them, "live such attractive, compelling lives, especially in how you interact with authorities," that people's accusations against you don't make any sense. Their comments get exposed for what they are, because people see your lives and have nothing bad they can say about you.

Which brings us full circle to v. 12 of our passage, right? That was precisely the instruction given *there*, that we should "*keep our conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against us, they might see our good deeds and glorify God.*" Just as a reminder, that's *why* we're doing all this. **We're doing it all because we have been set free by Jesus and we want other people to be set free as well.**

And let me just tell you specifically, **if you refuse to participate in the political bickering and back-and-forth that is so common in our day and age, you will look *different***. If you strike the balance of not bowing down to Trump, while still treating him and his supporters as image bearers of God, you will stick out like a sore thumb. Because almost nobody is doing *that*. Plenty of people are blindly following everything Trump says and does, and plenty of people are ripping him to shreds. But very few people are speaking up, while doing it with kindness and respect. But if you're a follower of Jesus, you have *precisely* that opportunity. That's precisely the type of posture we find in Jesus, and precisely the posture we've been given through his death and resurrection. And God just might use it to draw people to himself. And that's our goal.

Response Time

So we're going to transition in a moment into a time of response. As I often say, I don't have any way of knowing what God might be doing in your heart this morning.

- Maybe for you, you're realizing you way too easily fall in one of those two political "camps" we mentioned. You very easily fall in with the pro-Trump or anti-Trump camp, and you let that camp guide way too much of your thinking and feeling and acting. So maybe you need to spend some time asking the Holy Spirit to expose why that is, and help you discern how to walk in freedom from it.
- Maybe for you, you're realizing you've misunderstood freedom. Maybe you've been living as if freedom means doing whatever you want, when freedom actually has been given you in order to serve, in order to take the lowest posture willingly, to put Jesus on display. If that's you, maybe you need to spend some time asking God what that might look like in your life, your situations, your circumstances.
- Or maybe you came in here wrestling with something altogether different. Something that is just consuming your life right now and you need to wrestle through it or pray through it, or pray through it with someone else here, or whatever needs to happen.

Whatever it is, we want to allow space to do any of that, and to worship the God who through Jesus, makes it all possible. So let me pray, and then we'll do just that.